

First Report of a Papilloma in an Invasive Tropical House Gecko, *Hemidactylus mabouia* (Gekkonidae), in Cuba

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When invasive species arrive in new locations, they are always accompanied by their pathogens, parasites, and disease vectors. All can affect biodiversity, ecosystem function and services, and human health (Crowl et al. 2008). In particular, identifying and evaluating accompanying viruses is necessary to understand the pathogenic challenges facing both invasive and sympatric native populations and, in addition, could facilitate pandemic preparedness by aiding diagnoses of disease outbreaks and assisting in the conservation of threatened populations (Harding et al. 2022).

The Tropical House Gecko (*Hemidactylus mabouia*) arrived in Cuba in the 16th Century with the slave trade. It is widely distributed and abundant in Cuba, essentially ubiquitous in areas occupied by humans and sometimes present in neighboring natural areas (Borroto-Páez et al. 2015). However, knowledge of its pathogens and parasites in Cuba and on other Caribbean Islands is sparse.

In December 2024, while evaluating the abundance of Tropical House Geckos in the Hotel Florida in Camaguey Province (21.531066, -78.233785), we encountered 45 individuals in the evenings of two different days. We collected a few specimens to evaluate states of health and para-

site loads of orange mites (*Geckobia hemidactyli*, Actinedida: Pterygosomatidae) (Borroto-Páez and Reyes Pérez 2022). One adult male (SVL 121 mm) collected on 3 December had a wartlike lump near its right eye that we identified as a papilloma (Fig. 1). We attempted to keep the gecko in captivity, offering termites as food, but it died three days later and was preserved in 95% ETOH.

Papillomaviruses (PV), which are widespread in the animal kingdom, cause papillomatous lesions, defined as branching fronds of hyperplastic epidermis supported by a fibrovascular stalk (Schmidt et al. 2015). PV are epitheliotrophic, infecting skin, mucosal, and nasolacrimal epithelia, and can infect internal organs such as those of the reproductive and digestive tracts of their hosts (Truchado et al. 2018). These viruses generally exhibit high host specificity, although some PV can infect several species (Agius et al. 2019). Most PV are nonpathogenic and cause subclinical infections in infected individuals, often self-limiting papillomatous lesions, such as the benign wart-like lesion we observed in the gecko. However, a few PV strains (e.g., some types of the Human Papillomavirus [HPV]) are oncogenic and are associated with the development of malignant neoplasms (Munday and Kiupel 2010).

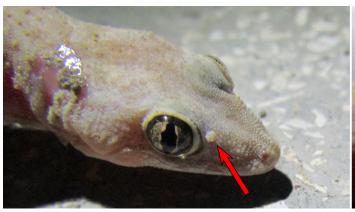




Figure 1. Dorsal and lateral views of a papilloma on a Tropical House Gecko (*Hemidactylus mabouia*) collected at Hotel Florida, Camaguey, Cuba. Photographs by Rafael Borroto-Páez.

Our diagnosis considered the characteristics, position in the host, and configuration of the wartlike lesion (i.e., infecting an epithelial surface as a peduncled filiform wart with a grained and branched surface), all of which suggested a lesion caused by PV. When diagnosing HPV, identification usually is clinical, based on the aspect and characteristics of the lesions, with histological and molecular analysis required only in special circumstances.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that a PV-induced lesion has been identified in *Hemidactylus mabouia*, although Agius et al. (2019) described PV in two Common House Geckos (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) from Christmas and Cocos Islands in Oceania, the first report of a sauropsid clade of PV in lizards and only the third and fourth in reptiles. In the case reported herein, we must still conduct a molecular analysis and identify the PV strain, which we hope to do as soon as the means become available. We also intend to examine the affected gecko in order to detect additional internal lesions.

Unfortunately, few studies have addressed parasites and pathogens in invasive species, although they potentially affect the health of native fauna and even humans. In only a few years of monitoring invasive populations of Tropical House Geckos in Cuba, without the specific intention of finding pathogens, one of us (RBP) has reported the first filariid nematode in this host (Borroto-Páez et al. 2022), new information on the distribution and abundance of orange mites (*Geckobia hemidactyli*, Actinedida: Pterygosomatidae) (Borroto-Páez et al. 2020; Borroto-Páez and Reyes Pérez 2022), and now a probable papillomavirus. This is a clear example of why invasive species, especially human commensals such as house geckos, must be monitored for pathogens and parasites, in order to identify any risks of transmission to humans and native species.

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