

The Cooperative Conservation of the Fijian Crested Iguana

By Terri Irwin
Director of the Queensland Reptile and Fauna Park (Australia Zoo),
Beerwah, Sunshine Coast

The plight of the Fijian Crested Iguana was brought to my attention in April 1994 while attending the Herpetological TAG meeting in Darwin. Terry Boylan, from the Taronga Park Zoo, explained that both *B vitiensis* and *B fasciatus* needed attention. *B vitiensis* was found on the island of Yaduataba in healthy numbers of 4000 to 6000 individuals. However, the National Trust of Fiji was having a difficult time finding funding to maintain this island reserve. Returning to Beerwah, Steve and I agreed to visit Fiji to further field study and find out, firsthand, what could be done to help these iguanas.

We arrived in Nadi on July 19th and proceeded to meet with the director for the National Trust, Mr. Birandra Singh, in Suva. Mr. Singh gave us an outline of the \$20,000.00 that would be required to get Yaduataba back on its feet as a reserve. Because Yaduataba was already well documented and somewhat inaccessible, we decided to focus our attention on other islands that might have supported Crested Iguanas. We learned quickly that arranging transport could be quite challenging. Four days later we had finally secured a boat and driver to explore the Mamanuca islands. When we visited the resort island of Tokoriki, we discovered two Crested Iguanas in captivity from the island of Modriki. A fellow named Suli tried to claim the pair as his own. As it turned out, the real owner of the iguanas was just away that day.

Eddie Foster was an Australian dive instructor that had lived on the island for the past two years. He and his wife, Karin, had rescued the iguanas when they observed some village children playing football with them. Eddie and Karin had contacted Taronga Park Zoo to ensure the proper care of these iguanas that they named Sun se and Sun se. The Fosters built them an enclosure 6 ½' tall X 2' wide X 3' deep and furnished it with limbs and foliage. The iguanas settled into their captive life so well that in March, Sun se laid four eggs. The Fosters immediately installed a heat lamp over the earth substrate where the eggs were laid and monitored temperatures. Since Eddie and Karin would be moving back to Australia in about one month, we discussed the fate of these iguanas and their eggs. First we considered releasing them back on Modriki Island, where they had originally been collected, and burying their eggs there. We discovered, however, that the goats had contributed to the decline of iguanas on Modriki Island. We spent a total of 12 days on Modriki and only three iguanas in their cage on Tokoriki wouldn't work either. Even with the detailed instructions, they were

neglected when the Fosters weren't there. We decided to look into Orchid Island at Suva where iguanas were being bred into captivity.

Orchid Island's one remaining Crested Iguana was in very sad shape. He had apparently been housed with other males of his kind in the past, and these confrontations had left him terribly scarred. He was brought out on a limb several times a day to be handled by visitors. This visit, again, convinced us to narrow our options. We decided to look into housing Sun se, Se se and their eggs outside of Fiji. We contacted Taronga Park Zoo and the job of exporting began.

On the 29th of July we arranged to meet with members of Fiji's government and the chiefs of the Mamanuca Islands to discuss the future of Modriki's Crested Iguanas. As the National Trust had no funds for this trip, we agreed to hire a large boat at \$110 per hour to accommodate them. Our meeting was a traditional Sevu Sevu. Even our clothes had to be altered to the Fijian style. We shared the customary drink of Kava (or Yunguana as the locals call it) and then it was down to business. The entire meeting was conducted in the native Fijian language, so we had an interpreter with us from the National Trust. The word "vokai" was mentioned quite often as that means "iguana". Often the chiefs would burst out laughing and I didn't need to be told what they were laughing at. They obviously thought we must have been a little bit crazy to spend so much time and effort on a little green lizard! We discussed with them the problems the goats were causing the iguanas. When we asked how many goats were on the island, we were surprised to hear there were less than 100. Then our interpreter explained that the villagers have difficulty comprehending numbers over 100. When we asked permission to remove the goats from the island, they said that was definitely not an option because they occasionally sold goats to the other villages. Goats are difficult to control, anyway, because only the military police are allowed firearms! So we then requested the next best thing. Would we be allowed to fence the goats out of the iguanas' territory? The most viable habitat was about 400m X between 100m & 300m. The chiefs agreed to consider this option and discuss it at their next Sevu Sevu in one month's time. There is a lot of pride with these villagers and their islands. So, even though they have no legal right to the iguanas, it is much better in the long run to work cooperatively with them. We also had to be careful not to give them the impression that the iguanas might be worth money to them, or it would simply mean more would be illegally collected. They did ask for our help acquiring a desalination plant. This would enable them to plant crops for profit over their entire island, effectively destroying the island's natural habitat. We began to understand that the villagers really believed we were somehow profiting out of our research work. You can't blame them for wanting a slice of the pie. We wouldn't have to teach the Fijians

the true meaning of conservation. Not an easy thing to instill in people who can't comprehend extinction.

The first of August brought us news that we weren't prepared for. Because of a medical situation with Karin, Eddie would need to leave for Australia immediately instead of in one month as originally planned. We could not realistically afford to stay and take care of Sun se, Se se and their eggs until the permits came through. Luckily, Tokokiri's manager came to our rescue. Jan Raymond allowed us to stay at the resort and in the dive master's quarters for a total of six nights free of charge. This was essential in order to oversee the incubation of the eggs. Even so, Steve and I were now dipping into our personal savings to keep going. Our time on Tokoriki was spent caring for the iguanas as well as teaching the villagers about them. They helped us gather food for the iguanas. Everything from Hibiscus blossoms to grasshoppers! Our seventh night was spent at Yanuya village. Our hosts were Jope and Rachael Samilla and they prepared a wonderful dinner including their locally grown cassava. This potato-like vegetable was part of their staple diet. Our evening was spent with no electricity, running water, or telephone.

Just lots of children eager for wildlife stories!

The next day we headed back to the main island to search for Modriki iguanas that had been sold as pets. The iguanas we managed to trace had all died. The iguanas that had been sold at the Lautoka markets were untraceable. Selling for between \$4.00 and \$5.00, they had simply disappeared.

On August 11th, our plans were going to be changed yet again. We had just returned from Tokoriki, Steve decided to remove the eggs from the incubator he built in the dive master's room and put them back in the ground, since we couldn't look after them daily. Steve thought this was best. As we arrived back at Nadi, Steve jumped out of the boat and landed on a shell. It cut his foot like glass. To avoid the risk of infection, we decided Steve would go back to Australia and I would stay in Fiji until the permits came through. With Steve gone, and miles of red tape to get through, I called my mother in the States to come and give her experienced assistance.

The day before we arrived, we met Birandra Singh in Suva and drove to Singatoka to see the now closed Kula Bird Park. It definitely has the potential to be developed into a zoological facility. Something I think Fiji desperately needs.

Our most exciting week came on August 15th when we discovered a living pet iguana from Modriki Island. Lemeki was living in a village near Nadi and his iguana

lived in the Breadfruit tree in his front yard. He had been given the iguana in April 1993 when he was returning from Yanuya Village. He said that there were several iguanas on the boat that had been collected from Modriki Island after a hurricane earlier that year. This was the largest Crested Iguana I had seen yet, in spite of the fact that the end of his tail was missing. Lemeki informed me that the villagers had chopped it off believing it could whip them and injure them! Lemeki was a retired school teacher and agreed to help teach the Yanuya Villagers about the iguana in their native tongue if the need ever arose. I felt a special bond with Lemeki because the local people thought we were both crazy for loving the iguana. When I called Steve he had good news of his own. The permits had finally come through and I could pick up Sun se, Se se and their eggs on the 17th and catch a flight to Australia on the 18th.

Mom and I decided to pick them up on a helicopter as the eggs would never survive through rough seas in a little boat. When we arrived at Tokoriki, everyone seemed very sad, almost in mourning. No one would tell me what was wrong until I was given a letter from one of the young chiefs of Yanuya Village. The letter said that the chiefs had changed their minds and we couldn't have the iguanas and their eggs after all. After a panicked call to Australia, we agreed I should meet with this chief and straighten things out. Before I left for Yanuya Village, I bumped into some Fijians I hadn't seen before. They wouldn't answer me when I greeted them in English or Fijian, I became worried that maybe they were going to take the iguanas. I decided to ask Jan, the manager, to look after the iguanas while I went to the village. She agreed, so I bagged them and left them in her office. I figured the eggs would be safe where they were. My meeting with Saramiah was unsuccessful. He explained that permission could not be given to take the iguanas until after the next Sevu Sevu in one month's time. I returned to Tokoriki with the difficult choice of what to do. As the helicopter approached, I knew I couldn't leave them. Mom carried the eggs in a container supported by my hat and the iguanas went in my duffle bag. Breathless, we made it to the helicopter. When we returned safely to Nadi, I called Steve to let him know what happened. We agreed it was the best decision. Since all the locals were aware of our work and knew we were supposed to be leaving with the iguanas. Steve thought it would be safer if Mom and I moved to another location this last night. Without telling anyone what we were carrying, we transported our iguanas and eggs across town. Mom was careful to keep the eggs away from any air conditioning drafts.

My flight to Australia was scheduled for 4.05am, so we arrived at the airport just before 2.00am. I was exhausted and ready to go home when the staff at the export department informed me that all cargo had to be put on the plane by 1.00am and now it was too late. After explaining to them that this was the first I knew that I had to be three hours early, not two, they basically didn't believe me!

I finally had to wake Birandra Singh and have him convince them by phone to load my cargo. At least they listened to the Director of the National Trust!

This adventure had a happy ending for Sun se and Se se, but what of the iguanas in the wild? I am very proud of the people we met and the work they are doing to help save them. Birandra Singh even got us air time on national television to tell the Fijians about their iguanas. But we couldn't stop there. We met with members of Taronga and Melbourne Zoos as well as Eddy and Karin to discuss what to do next. There are many zoos around the world concerned with the plight of these iguanas. Happily, two of the four eggs we transported have hatched and it appears that Sun se is gravid again. There are no easy answers to the problems facing the Fijian Crested Iguanas. Alone, one zoological facility could never save them. Together, we can encourage the Fijians to be proud of these 'Jewels of the Pacific'. Let's join with other zoos like Taronga Park and help with this worthwhile project.

Let's save the Fijian Iguanas.

Vanaka Vaka Levu
Thank you very much

This Article was presented at the ARAZPA/ASZK CONFERENCE, PERTH, APRIL 3-7 1995.