The History of Banded Iguanas in United States Collections

John Kinkaid
Animal Care Manager/Herpetology, Zoological Society of San Diego
(all photographs are by the author except where noted)

The Banded Iguana, *Brachylophus fasciatus*, was described to science in 1800, but has been in collections of United States zoos for only the past four decades. One of the most geographically isolated of all iguana species, *B. fasciatus* occurs naturally on the Fijian Island group and has been introduced into Vanuatu and Tonga. These animals are difficult to find in the wild, and little had been written about them, other than where they were alleged to be and some very basic natural history, until late in the 20th century. Early captives did not fare well and no captive reproduction took place until the mid-1970s.

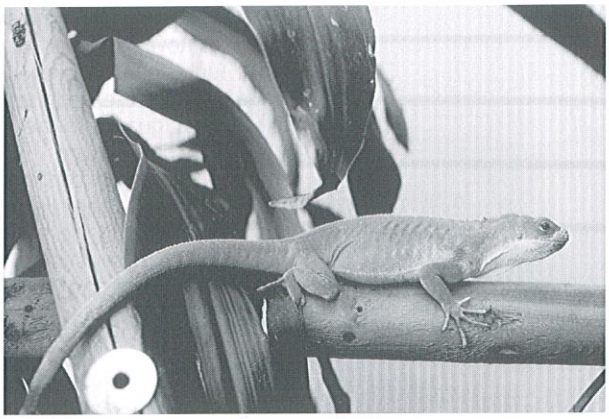
Because they are beautiful and geographically unique, Banded Iguanas are highly desirable display animals. The National Zoo in Washington, D.C., and zoos in Jacksonville, Sacramento, Knoxville, Dallas, and San Diego have displayed this species since the early 1970s. Importations were rare, although the species was not listed as endangered by the USFWS or CITES until 1980 and 1981, respectively. Although some good behavioral and basic husbandry information had been obtained, longevity was relatively short and reproduction unheard of — until the Knoxville Zoo produced hatchlings in 1977. Fijian Iguanas, especially neonates, seem to require a great deal of ultraviolet (UV) light exposure, more than most other iguanid species. Modern artificial lighting systems and UV-transmitting plastics undoubtedly have facilitated the husbandry of this species.

An adult male Banded Iguana (*Brachylophus fasciatus*) at the San Diego Zoo.

The 1965 ceremony during which His Royal Highness, Prince Tupouto' a-Tungi of Tonga (right), presented the first Banded Iguanas to the San Diego Zoo. Howard Chernoff, a member of the Zoo's Board of Trustees (left), was instrumental in the acquisition of these animals. Photograph courtesy of the San Diego Zoo.

A hatchling male Banded Iguana at the San Diego Zoo.

The San Diego Zoo's long history of working with the species began in 1965, when a member of the Zoo's Board of Trustees, Howard Chernoff, was planning a trip to American Samoa. He asked the Curator of Herpetology, Charles Shaw, if any reptiles from the area were of interest. Mr. Shaw replied that it was too bad that Mr. Chernoff was not going anywhere near Fiji or Tonga, as it would be nice to get iguanas from there. Mr. Chernoff coincidentally met His Royal Highness, Prince Tupouto' a-Tungi of Tonga, at a business meeting in Samoa. The Prince was pleased to donate six iguanas to the Zoo. These arrived with great ceremony, as they were among the first (or the very first) Banded Iguanas in the country. Five more animals were acquired from importers in 1975–1976, and the Zoo's first hatchlings arrived on 5 November 1981. Eager to start a viable long-



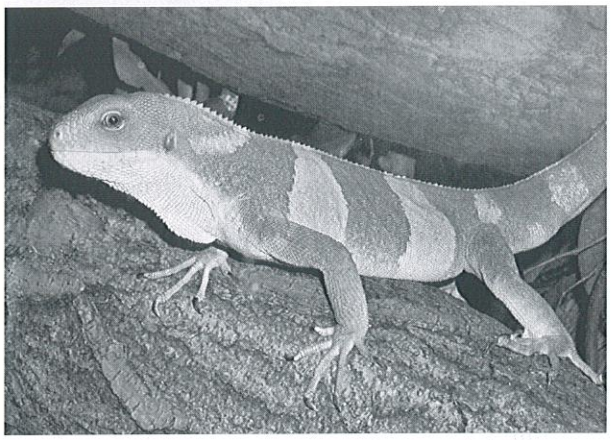
An adult female Banded Iguana on reserve at the San Diego Zoo.

term breeding program for this species, the Zoo needed additional founders. The Orchid Island Cultural Centre in Suva, Fiji, and the Fijian Government generously approved our plan and donated two pairs of iguanas in 1987 and an additional three pairs in 1989. No other iguanas have been imported into the United States since those animals arrived.

With the additional founders, more experience, and better knowledge of how to manage *Brachylophus*, the U.S. population continues to double every decade. Almost eighty animals are now in U.S. institutions. Over 130 hatchlings have been produced at the San Diego Zoo, which is now into its fourth captive generation. An AZA studbook and Population Management Plan are maintained at San Diego. These exist to assist in recommending movements, pairings, and breedings now and in the future. Several other U.S. zoos have also bred Banded Iguanas, and this success provides a hopeful future for these beautiful lizards.

However, needs remain. First, we will contact the Fijian government in an effort to implement population surveys, habitat analyses, predator control programs, and perhaps even reintroduction into suitable areas within the historical range of the species. Similar programs are already in place for the more critically endangered Crested Iguana, *Brachylophus vitiensis*. Also, because the U.S. population of Banded Iguanas was established with only twelve founders, a desperate need exists for additional animals in order to maintain genetic diversity. Consequently, future importations are recommended. Finally, I would love to apply everything we've learned about Banded Iguanas to a breeding program for Crested Iguanas, possibly working in conjunction with existing programs in Fiji and Australia.

Reserve housing cages for Banded Iguanas at the San Diego Zoo.



Banded Iguana at The Toledo Zoo. *Photograph by Stephanie Beiser.*