PROFILE

James "Skip" Lazell

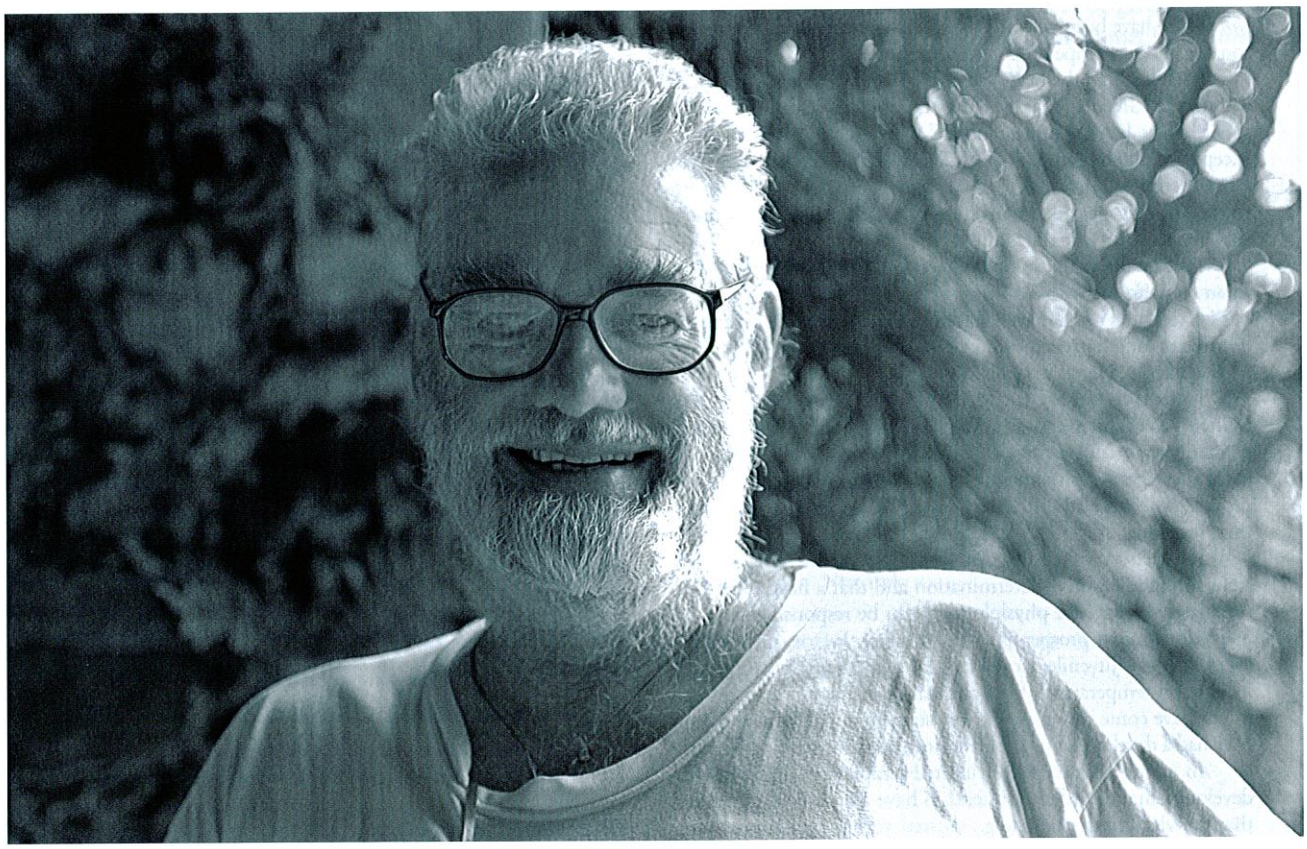
Numi Mitchell

The Conservation Agency

Never mind the 219 publications, the dozens of new species described, and the unlikely places he's been to find or rediscover some of the world's rarest creatures, James "Skip" Lazell will always be a snake dangler. It began in early childhood, when he startled relatives with creatures thrust at them from a sock or pocket. Ultimately, this was not "just a phase." In man's clothing, Skip remains the boy who revels in disrupting the complacent with uncomfortable surprises pulled from beneath rocks or the recesses of his fertile mind. And this is the enthusiast who has become an interventionist on behalf of the Rock Iguana in the British Virgin Islands.

Skip knew his calling from the start. Joe Cadbury, Science Teacher at Germantown Friends School, first took him seriously. Under Cadbury's wing, Skip began his first collections of animals in suburban Philadelphia. In his parents' small house, he raised woodchucks (which subsequently colonized the neighborhood), young bats (which he nursed through gassy colic), and uncountable stacks of caged amphibians and reptiles.

His family and friends were tolerant, but made him impatient with what he considered sanctimonious responses to extremely reasonable requests (e.g., May I bring home this rattlesnake?). That impatience led to a lifetime commitment to torment them in every way possible (as well as any others who, as he saw it, irrationally blocked his progress). Cadbury ran interference with his parents, assuring them that Skip's passion for animals would later translate into scientific prowess. Meanwhile, Skip's live animal collection was burgeoning, and he needed funds to support them. To this end, as an elementary schoolchild, Skip opened an aquarium repair business. Resourcefully, the glass he used was removed from portraits of The Venerable in the halls of Germantown Friends. When the Headmaster questioned and accused him, young Skip was outraged that the man had con-



James D. (Skip) Lazell on Guana Island (October 2002). *Photograph by John Binns.*

Even during the war years (December 1944), Skip was able to pursue his interest in animals. *Photograph by Katee Lazell.*

fronted him "without a shred of evidence." At this point, Skip was probably lucky that he fell under the influence of the late Roger Conant, author of *A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of the Eastern United States.* Skip so revered his work that Conant could control Skip's wilder side by using a strong dose of conditional acceptance. For example, Skip was not allowed to catch venomous snakes until Roger Conant — not his parents — gave him permission to do so.

At 17 years of age, Skip, because of Conant's referral, was funded by the Philadelphia Zoo to go to the West Indies to collect specimens. Here he began the biogeographical and taxonomic studies of *Anolis,* which would later become the focus of his doctoral work. Along the way, he so offended his major professor, the late Ernest Williams at Harvard, with his outspoken (and maybe impertinent) ideas on iguanine relationships that he was dropped as a student. Years later, Williams revealed his hidden regard for Skip's work by publishing the dissertation as a *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology* (MCZ) with full color plates, and reinstating him at the Museum.

Skip has never wavered from his mission of documenting the rare or new. Once on Saint Lucia, he rented a used car that lost its brakes as he crested a mountain peak. He remembers only the tumbling plummet. He was found hours later, 300 feet down the mountainside, in a tree, clutching an iguana. His glasses, without which he is basically blind, were gone and he was repeatedly mumbling, "That's all I needed: just one iguana." It is in the MCZ.

After his university days, his lean wrestler's physique gravitated toward that of a sit-and-wait predator. Nevertheless, I have seen him spring fifteen feet from a standstill to nail a Red-bellied Watersnake on a riverbank. He is an adventurer. He tackles even well traveled biogeographical regions of the globe like a lunar explorer: he assumes he will find something new — and usually does.

Skip is concerned about and enjoys people, but rarely allows his mission to be slowed by political correctness. He has no time for foot-dragging. One of his most controversial and ongoing projects has involved one of the rarest West Indian iguanas, *Cyclura pinguis.* Originally distributed across the entire Puerto Rico Bank, this iguana's range had shrunk to one peripheral population on Anegada. Researcher Michael Carey had noted in 1968 that the Anegada population was threatened by food competition from free ranging livestock. A national park, which could protect this last naturally occurring population, had been proposed by 1980, but Skip, who was working for The Nature Conservancy in the British Virgin Islands at the time, judged it was a long way from becoming reality. Skip came in contact with the owners of Guana Island, part of the iguana's former range. The owners, Henry and Gloria Jarecki, had established a native wildlife sanctuary consisting of most of the 850-acre island. Skip

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He believes bats make fine pets

A VETERAN naturalist at 18, James D. (Skip) Lazell recently completed a definitive study of the local long-tailed salamander. He has been working on the project since he was 13. "I dabble in birds, small mammals and spiders," says Skip, "but reptiles are my principal interest."

Last summer he accompanied a moth-collecting expedition to the Caribbean, then struck out on his own on an assignment for the Philadelphia Zoo. He captured crocodiles in Jamaica, had only one mishap. "I had a beautiful eight-foot Yellow snake eaten by a mongoose," he reports.

An habitué of the Zoo from the time he was old enough to ride a trolley car alone, he was formerly one of the three juvenile panelists on the "Meet Me at the Zoo" television program. "He knew how to say *Anolis carolinensis* before he could say *chameleon,*" his mother recalls.

In first grade he started taxidermy, bringing home badly-mangled stuffed specimens of local fauna for his mother's admiration. This steeled her for his later enthusiasms, including a collection of live bats which she was obliged to feed and exercise when Skip was away for the week end. "Bats make wonderful pets," he insists. "They tame in two weeks."

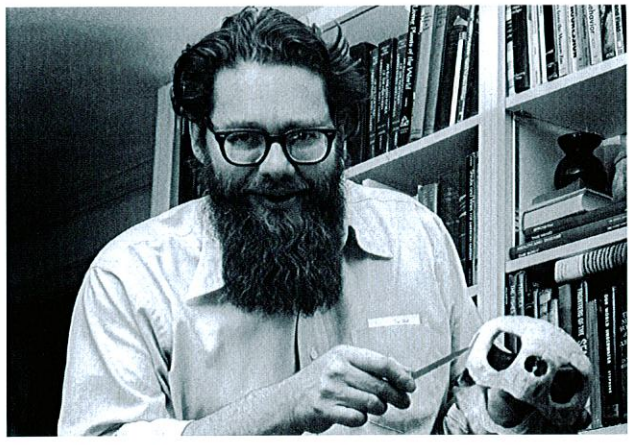
Graduated from Germantown Friends School last June—where he made his letter in football and wrestling—he lives with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Lazell, at 133 Harvey st. Currently he is a freshman at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. His gear for college included one pet—a three-foot King snake.

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER MAGAZINE, DECEMBER 8, 1957

This article about the young naturalist appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* magazine (December 1957).

saw and seized an opportunity to restore and protect *C. pinguis*. He swiftly walked a proposal through government channels and relocated eight iguanas from Anegada to Guana Island. Although the paper trail shows that he did have both governmental permission and local cooperation, the people originally involved have since died, changed positions, or changed stories.

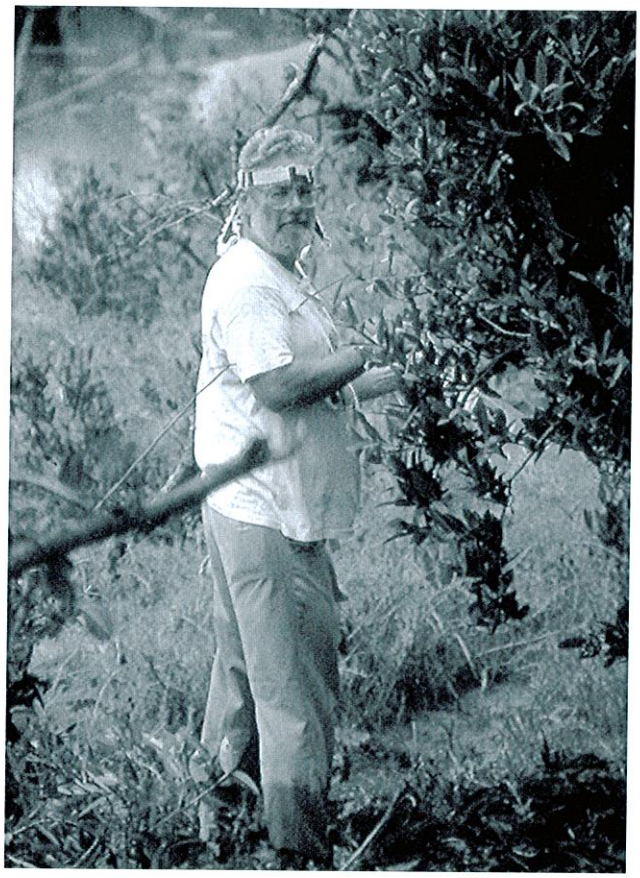
Collecting Haitian Boas (*Epicrates striatus*) for the Philadelphia Zoo (ca. 1957). Serge Brierre is on the left. *Photograph by John Coutsis.*



During his brief career as a teacher, Skip graphically explained to his students how they could be improved (March 1978). *Photograph by Nancy Nielsen.*

Skip with an Hawaiian Rock Wallaby on Oahu in 1979. *Photograph by Guy Slaughter.*

Skip and the "Devil" (Tasmania, 1981). *Photograph by Marshall Sklar.*



Skip in the field on Guana Island (British Virgin Islands, 2002). *Photograph by Gad Perry.*

Part of the team conducting a population census of *Cyclura pinguis* on Guana Island (October 2002); left to right: Lynford Cooper, Gad Perry, and Skip. *Photograph by Kate LeVering.*

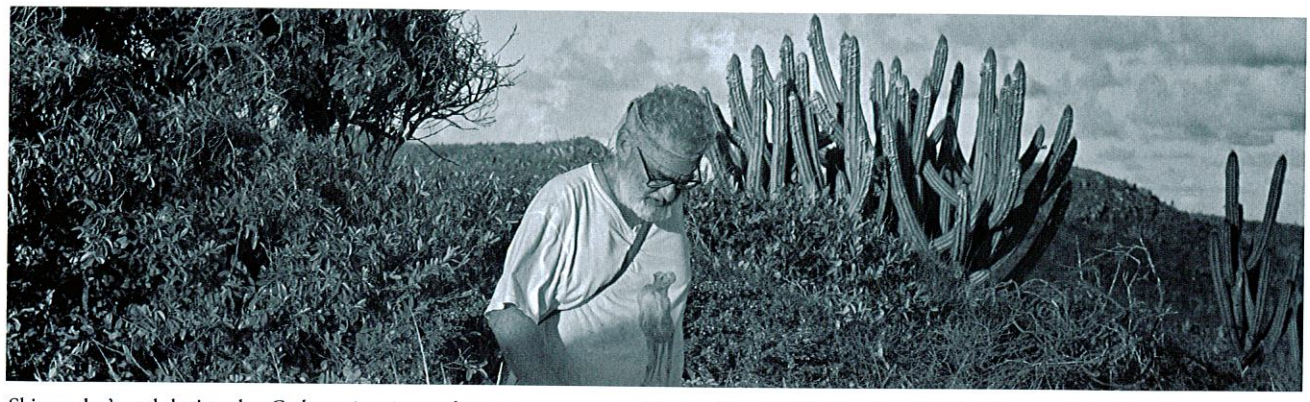
Consequently, long after the relocation, Skip still is being characterized as a loose cannon or a renegade; his choice to relocate has been questioned by almost everyone.

Undaunted, Skip has continued for almost two decades with his program to restore *C. pinguis* to parts of its former range. As a result of his efforts, Guana has a population of over 100 iguanas, Necker Island has approximately 30, and Norman Island received a dozen colonizers in the fall of 2003 (I was pleased to be a part of the latter effort). These animals, all descendants of the eight individuals from Anegada, now represent approximately half of the world's population. As of 2004, local people remain divided over a proposal to establish a national park on Anegada, and the iguana population there continues to decline, primarily as a consequence of livestock competition for food and feral cat predation. Establishing a protected area on Anegada remains vital in order to preserve as much of the species' genetic diversity as possible. However, unless and until that becomes a reality, we are fortunate that the iguanas' eggs are in more than one basket.

For the 30 plus years I have known him, Skip has generated a "theory of the day" for everything he observes of biological interest. If the next bit of additional data topples the idea, he cheerfully abandons old Theory A for new Theory B. Skip is not wedded to his postulates; they merely reflect his all-or-none approach. As outrageous as some of his ideas may sound initially, Skip has not infrequently been proven correct by more conservative and methodical scientists. Herpetological colleague, C. Robert Shoop, who died in late 2003, characterized Skip in the following way: "He provides an absolutely critical function: inspiration."

Additional Reading

Lazell, J. 2003. Looking for lizards in all the right places, pp. 215–231. In: R.W. Henderson and R. Powell (eds.), *Islands and the Sea: Essays on Herpetological Exploration in the West Indies.* Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles Contributions to Herpetology, vol. 20. Ithaca, New York.



Skip at day's end during the *Cyclura pinguis* population assessment on Necker Island, BVI (October 2002). *Photograph by John Binns.*

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Sauromalus klauberi, Isla Santa Catalina, Baja California Sur (see article on p. 78). *Photograph by Brad Hollingsworth.*