

Encounter with the Iguana Mama

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When was the last time you won the state lottery for \$10 million? In the past, it seemed that herp hobbyists faced better odds of winning the lottery than successfully breeding iguanas in captivity. Even the major zoos in the world had trouble raising iguanas in captivity, let alone breeding them.

The first gigantic leap forward in captive breeding of iguanas was started in Panama by Dr. A. Stanley Rand, senior scientist with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, and Dr. Dagmar A. Werner, a German-born, Swiss-educated biologist. In 1983, the Smithsonian Institute funded their first-of-a-kind biology experiment to raise iguanas in captivity for future release back into the wild.

To make a long story short: Project support ended after about five years, the political climate changed in Panama, and Dr. Werner packed up 2,400 iguanas and years of research data and headed for Costa Rica in a small pickup truck. The story of getting her animals and truck to Costa Rica is an adventure in itself. All the details on arriving, acquiring the land to raise the iguanas, procuring funding to keep the project alive, and dealing with Costa Rica officials who embraced Dr. Werner and her iguana project deserve a special story some day.

The independent iguana research project now being conducted by Dr. Werner in Costa Rica is partly to release iguanas back into the jungle to re-populate devastated local iguana colonies. But the project is also layered like an onion—returning iguanas to the jungle, creating a stable and nutritious food source for the *campesinos* (peasant farmers), encouraging the growth and retention of more trees, boosting local economies, stimulating ecology awareness,

saving the rainforests, and more.

I feel that to really know about iguanas you need to pick the brains of the top people in iguana research worldwide. When I was in Costa Rica, I was lucky enough to learn much needed information about iguana breeding from Dr. Werner, sometimes called the “Iguana Mama,” and Daisy, her main support person.

Every trip I take to Latin America seems to turn into an adventure, and the saga of visiting Dr. [Dagmar] Werner’s iguana research station in Costa Rica was no exception.

Before I left for Costa Rica, I had sent a series of long letters to Dr. Werner explaining why I wanted to visit her research station (farm). Several months later I arrived with my photographer and translator (Amanda) in San José, Costa Rica. The next morning, without missing a beat, we were off to the iguana farm, as excited as two children heading for the candy shop with a wad of dollar bills. By midday we’d feel more like we held Monopoly money instead.

The two-hour bus ride from San José to the Pacific-slope town of Orotina was the easy part of the journey. Finding the iguana farm was the first obstacle. In retrospect we were in the center of the bull’s-eye and

couldn’t see the target. We asked several local people where the farm was and each time they headed us in a different compass direction. In Latin American countries it is considered impolite not to help people, and it’s bad manners not to give directions when directions are requested. Even when the local people we encountered didn’t know the answer, out of politeness they often made one up.

***The vigorous,
the healthy, and
the happy survive
and multiply.***

— Charles Darwin
(from *The Origin of Species*)

After heading in all the wrong directions for more than an hour, we ended up walking down a long, desolate, dirt jungle road that ended at a heavily fortified steel gate. The sign next to the gate more or less said, "Scram, get out of here, and don't bother us." For the very brave, the sign did have a phone number to call. We retraced our steps back up the road, finally found a working phone, and called the number.

The person who answered the phone was the "Iguana Mama" herself. Dr. Werner asked what I wanted (probably more surprised that anyone would dare to call). I told her about the letters and what I wanted to accomplish. She said she never received any letters, and from there she verbally shredded me like a pit bull at dinner time. She said, "You can't come in...you must leave." The innocent, excited child in me sank with a thud. I had been forewarned that Dr. Werner can at times be very difficult (make that a capital D). She said that she was very busy and had no time for outsiders.

I made a last-minute attempt to get permission to see the iguana farm. I said, "When I got into San José I called your office to see if I could come out to the research station, but I got no answer." I wanted to let her know that I didn't just drop by that day and expect people to jump for me. In a biting manner, she asked how I got her office phone number. I told her I got it from Dr. Gordon Burghardt (one of the world's leading iguana experts and co-editor of the classic book *Iguanas of the World*; I'd corresponded with him since starting my own book research).

She said, "You *know* Dr. Burghardt?" I said, "Yes." She said again, "You *know* Dr. Burghardt?" I said, "Yes." She seemed very surprised at this concept. I said that Dr. Burghardt had given me much useful research information on iguanas over the years. I was just telling her the truth.

And as though I were caught in a scene from a child's story book, "Dr. Burghardt" was the magic word for the day, like "Shazam" or "Open Sesame." Again she said, "You *know* Dr. Burghardt?" I said, "Yes."

She said, "Good. Then be at the gate tomorrow morning at 9:00 a.m. We won't wait if you are not there. And you will not be treated special. We have important people coming from Sweden. We will be releasing 1,000 juvenile iguanas into the jungle. The press will be there—and you can come along." And she hung up.



This adult iguana is part of the breeding stock at Dagmar Werner's iguana farm in Costa Rica. The Branded code on the side of the iguana is for genetic and breeding reference.
Photograph: A. H. Iles

See the farm! See the iguanas! See the "Mama Iguana" and be part of the team releasing iguanas back into the wild! All of the troubles getting back into San José that day didn't even register on the stress meter. We were going to see and be involved in some amazing things the next day.

I am sure that most of you are thinking by now that the "Iguana Mama" appears to be less than a caring mama, essentially treating us like insects. There is no way to describe in 100 words or less Dr. Werner's real contribution to preservation. She is taking on a giant project: to save iguanas, but in the bigger picture to save the rainforests. I know her onion-layered plan and it is well thought-out, correct, smart, and she is going about all the levels in the right way.

She is very focused, like a laser beam. And sometimes things in the path of a laser beam get a little singed. She can't be bothered by anything that could slow her progress. Luckily, I knew what I was up against, so I didn't allow her not-so-pleasant manner to affect me. I see her as a champion. If I had a crucial project and needed some good back-up, I would love to have someone like her on my side.

The *Reader's Digest* version of just getting back to the "farm" the next day was mostly no sleep and waiting for hours at the gate. We arrived very early, at about 7 a.m., to make sure we didn't miss anything. After 11 a.m. we were beginning to think that perhaps the previous day's Central American high heat and humidity had triggered hallucinations that I had actually talked with Dr. Werner. But about 11:30 a.m. we heard cars, then we saw the dust rising in the distance, and then

around the corner came a small pickup truck with two cars trailing behind. By the time the vehicles arrived at the gate my body was drowning in adrenaline.

Little did I realize that the difficult task of getting into the iguana farm was not over yet. I ran up to the pickup truck, spotted Dr. Werner, and said I was Jim Hatfield. All she said was, "Open the gate." This adventure to the farm now had all the elements of a Greek tragedy, but written by Mel Brooks.

I ran to the gate and opened it. I stood at attention like a soldier as the three vehicles passed. The vehicles stopped long enough for someone to yell, "Close the gate" (guess who?). I was laughing inside and having one of my best days. Like someone once said, "Attitude is everything."

As I closed the gate, the lead vehicle with Dr. Werner moved ahead. I ran after the pickup and in one smooth leap I cleared the edge of the pickup bed and landed inside the moving vehicle with near-perfect form. We approached the next gate, and before Dr. Werner could even open her mouth I jumped out of the moving truck, ran to the gate, and opened it—and of course I stood at attention.

The parade of cars and trucks proceeded without slowing down while I closed the gate, ran and caught up with the moving target, and again the jump into the pickup bed. The Swedish people in the two cars following the lead truck, who were from World Wildlife Fund, were laughing and seemed to be completely entertained by my actions.

One more gate, one more jump, and we arrived at the compound. When the cars stopped, the Swedish people immediately came over and

introduced themselves and seemed delighted to meet me. When Dr. Werner got out of the truck I asked her (with a little grin on my face) if I closed all of the gates properly. I was just trying to finish one more line of this Mel Brooks movie that I had invented inside my head. She said, "Yes, it was fine." At the corner of her mouth a slight smile started to curve upward. She also got a twinkle in her eye that she seemed unable to control. As stern as she would like to appear, she was somewhat melted by this bizarre gate experience. Mel Brooks would have loved the way the script turned out.

After that, she seemed to soften toward me with her speech and actions. She was actually very nice. I think she liked the fact that I didn't crumble under her iron rule. That I would, and could, work for her. In fact, later that day I would literally kill for her iguana cause.

She spent some time with me at the farm and then said, "I am sorry, but I must be with the people from Sweden." Daisy, second in command to Dr. Werner, gave us some research information on the farm and showed Amanda and me the iguana compound. There was the research center, breeding stations, and cages for the more than 5,000 hatchling, juvenile, and adult iguanas. Each iguana was beautiful and perfect.

As we toured the facilities everything was clean and spotless—almost Eden-like. But then we rounded one cage of large adult iguanas and found a snake in this iguana paradise. The snake, which looked to be about 4' long, had threaded its body through part of the 1" to 1½" square wire cage mesh. The last 7" to 8" of its body was woven into the wire like thread in a piece of fabric, but its upper body was moving freely toward the adult iguanas in the cage.

I feel that iguanas truly have personalities and physical expressions, and the contorted looks on the two iguanas in the cage was of terror. I yelled at Daisy to tell her what was happening, and she motioned to one of the farm workers. In a split second that 4' snake sprang and extended to 6', stopped no more than an inch from the side of Daisy's neck, then fell to the ground. The only thing that prevented the snake from biting Daisy's neck was that its lower body was still threaded into the wire mesh. It sprang full speed and full length, missing the target by less than the width of its open mouth.



In these cages hatchlings can choose to be in direct sunlight or shade. This photograph shows the hollow bamboo tubes they can hide in if frightened. *Photograph: A. H. Iles*

As soon as the snake struck, missed its target, and fell to the ground, Daisy said, "SON...OF...A...BITCH" in this long, drawn-out, adrenaline-filled, breath-catching pace. Then, with an agitated hand motion, she hurried the farm worker to where we were standing. The worker arrived with a rake to hold the snake's head down and a machete for killing the intruder. But he wasn't going to do it, and Daisy wasn't going to do it, either. They both turned and looked at me. The worker, with both arms straight out, held the machete in one hand and the rake in the other. He dangled each tool from just his thumb and forefinger, as if the implements were contaminated. He came closer and pressed the tools next to me. I don't speak Spanish but I do read body language. I thought, "Hell, I don't work here...and I don't like killing any animals."

Then I again saw the look of extreme terror on the iguanas' faces and without hesitating I killed the snake. Before the machete made contact,

I mentally wished the snake no pain. There was no anger in the deed I was about to perform. I wished the snake the best in the next life, understood it was doing what all animals do (try to survive), but I had a responsibility at that particular moment in the cosmos to protect the iguanas.

When the snake was dead, no one would get close to it. Daisy and the workers thought the snake might be a Fer-de-Lance. That's a snake that once it bites you, you don't even have time to dial 911 for help.

So, like I said in the beginning, trips to Latin America can become epic adventures very easily. It's all part of the challenge of gathering research information. Often the best information is the "stuff" you can only get in person.

One example of the information I picked up at the farm from Dr. Werner was that female iguanas are basically lazy. If you can provide an alternative to them having to dig tunnels for laying eggs, they will easily adapt to that situation.



Until now, no books have adequately addressed the complete needs of pet iguanas. But *Green Iguana—The Ultimate Owner's Manual*, the culmination of 5 years of research, changes all that. The book reads like a novel—fun, interesting, exciting—but with the accuracy and impact of a scientific journal.

GREENIGUANA

The Ultimate Owner's Manual

covers just about everything from birth to death of an iguana.

This 2 1/2 pound, 6"x9" book has more than 600 pages of text, 10 appendixes, a comprehensive index, 16 pages of color photographs, 16 black-and-white photos, and 35 illustrations and charts. The author has gathered information from the world's top iguana scientists and research institutions, hundreds of iguana owners throughout North America and Europe, veterinarians, people in the pet trade—and from his own field research in the jungles of Mexico and Central America. Plus the real-life experience of raising his own iguana, Za (pictured on the front and back covers).

EXCERPTS FROM BOOK REVIEWS

Vivarium magazine (Vol 8 No 3)

"In both content and presentation *Green Iguana—The Ultimate Owner's Manual* sets its own high standards. Most readers will consider it the definitive work on management, care and personality traits of green iguanas in captivity. If you own a green iguana or if you are thinking of getting one, you should buy this book."

Reptiles magazine (August 1997)

"The amount of reliable information provided is staggering, and it is presented in an attractive package. If you own a green iguana, you really should pick up a copy."

Bulletin of the Chicago Herpetological Society (January 1997)

"The title of this book is no exaggeration. Never before have I seen such a thorough book on the care and maintenance of green iguanas."

COMMENTS FROM IGUANA OWNERS

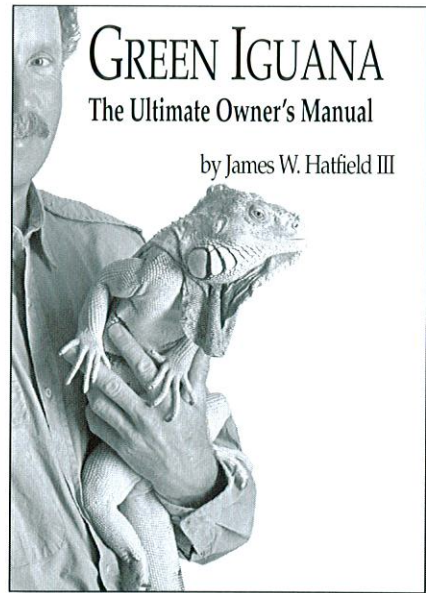
Excellent, excellent!—Lynn Wiegard, Canada
Huge, beautiful, personal and caring!—Suzanne Hockston, NY

It's the best book of its kind on the market!—Joseph Widlauz, IL

This [book] should be considered the bible of iguana manuals!—Mike Lozano, FL

It's the most informative book I have ever read [on iguanas]!—Tracey Zimmerman, NY
I have never read any animal care book better than this one!—Cathleen Cowan, FL

IF YOU HAVE AN IGUANA, if you ever thought about owning one, or even if you simply like the idea of reading about these exotic, prehistoric-looking lizards, *Green Iguana—The Ultimate Owner's Manual* is for you. This book, the culmination of 5 years of research, reads like a novel—fun, interesting, exciting—but with the accuracy and impact of a scientific journal. **Remember this book — it's the ULTIMATE!**



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Adult male, *Cyclura rileyi cristata*,
on Sandy Cay, Bahamas.
Photograph: Carl Fuhri