

RELEASED IGUANAS ARE BECOMING A PROBLEM

By Gail Keeler, UF/IFAS/Monroe County Extension Services

The green iguana is a tree-dwelling lizard species native to tropical forests in Mexico, Central and South America. Iguanas are not native to the Florida Keys and are now considered to be pests by some residents. They sunbathe by the canals and lounge in the trees. And they love the hot and humid weather.

Why then are so many being seen in the Keys? The population growth in these animals has occurred because people buy them for pets but later release them into the wild when they realize the iguanas require more care, time, and money than can be provided. Also, some iguanas may be escapees from caring families. Hundreds of thousands of iguanas are imported into the U.S. every year. The abandonment of iguanas and other reptile pets is at epidemic proportions.

In their natural habitat, iguanas dine almost exclusively on leaves. Keys residents complain the iguanas are eating their vegetation, living in their trees, and defecating on their property, including on their boats.

“People need to understand that having an iguana for a pet is a commitment of at least 12 years, just like a cat or a dog,” said Kim Gabel, Environmental Horticulture Agent for UF/IFAS/Monroe County Extension Services. “While they are cute and bright green when newborn, they will grow to six feet long at maturity and can weigh 15 pounds.”

Problems are created when the hapless animals are turned out into the wild by people who can no longer deal with their care. Iguanas are good climbers, good jumpers, and good diggers, and have no natural enemies in the Keys. They are accomplished swimmers and can remain submerged for long periods of time without surfacing for air.

It is illegal to release any non-native animal into the wild in Florida (FS §372.265). The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Law Enforcement says fines for this first-degree misdemeanor can reach \$1,000 and/or one year in jail.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Consider these facts before getting an iguana:

- Do not buy an iguana from a pet store, dealer, or breeder if you have not completely familiarized yourself with its care requirements, now and into the future.
- Plan to care for the iguana as a pet for its complete life of 15 years.
- You will need to acclimate it to human touch. This could take 30 minutes or more each day.
- You will need an enclosure of at least seven feet tall by nine feet by four feet with a climbing post for each mature iguana. They are solitary animals who do not like to live with other iguanas. Domination and intimidation are always present even if you cannot see them, especially during mating season.
- Females lay eggs once a year in burrows they dig.

- You must buy special food and feed them every day. Close attention to nutritional needs is required.
- You have to bathe them.
- You will need to trim their 20” long, sharp claws.
- Their health must be monitored on a daily basis.
- You will need to clean up their feces (which can stain) every day.
- Attention must be paid to cleanliness to avoid external parasites.
- You must provide clean water every day.
- Regular veterinarian visits are required.
- You will need to shield them from cold weather.
- Most importantly, they must be prevented from escaping your property.

HOW CAN I GET RID OF THEM?

If you are feeding or watering iguanas in your yard, stop. To protect a vegetable garden or other valuable shrubbery, try covering it with chicken wire sunk into the earth several inches or bird or deer netting. Release any animals that get caught in the netting. Try using a plastic flowerpot, upside down, around the trunks of small trees to keep iguanas from climbing them. They tend to be vegetarians and some of their favorite foods include hibiscus, bougainvillea, flowers, young plants, and leaves. They are opportunistic feeders and will eat many other types of vegetation. They do eat less in cool weather.

Recommended methods of capture include live traps (maximum size 36”) that can be borrowed from animal shelters (baited with fruit and flowers), or netting. Richard Hanson, who lives in Key Largo and has raised iguanas, recommends the following procedure: wear thick gloves, throw a cast net over the iguana, and then throw a towel on top. Being careful of the teeth, claws, and tail, guide it into a 32-gallon trash can, put on the lid, and take it to your local animal shelter. Do not grab the iguana by the tail, as it may come off. While iguanas are not normally aggressive, they will defend themselves.

Dr. Doug Mader from the Marathon Veterinary Hospital warns, “Iguanas have 100 sharp teeth and can bite through your finger. Like alligators, they bite and roll.”

It is best to let the animal shelter deal with them when they are captured. Iguanas are, as all animals, protected by Florida Statute §828.12, Cruelty to Animals. You might try contacting a local pet store to see if they would take it. According to the SPCA on Stock Island, iguanas can be humanely euthanized if brought to the shelter on College Road.

Familiarize yourself completely with iguana care before buying one. They are not throwaway animals that we can discard when we tire of them. Help protect the Keys’ natural environment and don’t release iguanas or any exotic species into the wild.