

16. GREEN IGUANAS

A case study of a high risk species illegally kept in and smuggled into Australia

Species: Green iguana (*Iguana iguana*)

Origin: Central and South America. Naturalised populations exist in the United States (including Hawaii and the Virgin Islands) Grand Cayman, Puerto Rico and Fiji.

Potential environmental impacts:²⁵⁰ Green iguanas can grow up to 2 metres long; they are arboreal and agile climbers. A habit of diving into water (and staying submerged while swimming) makes them difficult to capture. Large areas in Australia, particularly across the north and down the east coast are considered climatically suitable for green iguanas.²⁵¹ It is difficult to predict what their environmental impacts will be but a Queensland government risk assessment found they are a high risk species due to several attributes:

- a history as a pest overseas (Florida, Hawaii, etc.)
- a preference for tropical and subtropical climates
- an extensive native range
- a broad, non-specialised diet (mainly herbivores)
- relatively high fecundity.



Photo: Garen Meguerian (creative commons licence)

Biosecurity issues

Interceptions and incursions: Green iguanas are not permitted in Australia. They have frequently been intercepted: from 1999–2010, 17 animals in 10 incidents were seized, stolen or surrendered from illegal keeping in NSW, South Australia and Victoria, and 5 animals in 2 incidents were intercepted as illegal imports into NSW.²⁵² From 2003–2010 least 1 green iguana was intercepted as a stowaway (in the Northern Territory). There has been at least one incursion probably of an escaped or released pet – a female was captured at large in Townsville in April 2011.²⁵³

Risk assessment and contingency planning: Green iguanas have been assessed as having an extreme establishment risk ranking.²⁵⁴ A Queensland risk assessment found that green iguanas are a high risk species.²⁵⁵ Despite the acknowledged risks, there is no contingency plan (as far as we are aware) to guide a national response to an incursion.

Enforcement: Eradication of a naturalised population could be difficult – green iguanas tend to live near water and can escape capture by swimming underwater; they are also well camouflaged in trees. So there needs to be a strong focus on prevention, including effective at-border biosecurity to detected illegal imports and stowaways and enforcement of regulations against possession and sale. There is a strong commercial incentive to smuggle green iguanas.²⁵⁶ Like crocodiles, green iguanas make appealing pets when young, but grow to an inconvenient size, increasing the risk that illegal pets will be liberated.

²⁵⁰ Cshures (2011)

²⁵¹ Henderson and Bomford (2011)

²⁵² Henderson and Bomford (2011)

²⁵³ Roznik (2011)

²⁵⁴ Henderson and Bomford (2011)

²⁵⁵ Cshures (2011)

²⁵⁶ Cshures (2011)

Issues for inquiry

Risk reduction

- What measures have been and should be taken to limit the risk of green iguanas (and other species likely to be illegally kept) from establishing in Australia?

Contingency planning

- What steps have been and should be taken to maximise the prospects of an efficient and effective response if green iguanas do become established?

References

Cshures S. 2011. Green iguana. Pest animal risk assessment. Biosecurity Queensland.

Henderson W, Bomford M. 2011. Detecting and preventing new incursions of exotic animals in Australia. Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre, Canberra.

Roznik E. 2011. Observations and capture of an introduced Green Iguana, *Iguana iguana* (Linnaeus, 1758), in tropical Queensland, Australia. *Herpetofauna* 41: 25-27.