

The Law of the Wild

An Ecologist's Life



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with long sticks and knives. We were incarcerated in a strong enclosure as quite large groups of lizards began to warm up in the sun and take an interest, trying to push their way through the fence to get at their breakfast. Us! Getting back down to the camp at the seashore was a little tricky since by then, around midday, the sun was beating down and the animals were very active.

Going down the narrow paths one had to be careful since lizards would often wait in the undergrowth close by and would either try and bite you or bash you over the head or legs with their tails, a method perfected for their main prey Timor deer. So we ran at full tilt until we came across a few gathered on the path blocking our way. I was armed with one of these

long sticks and so were the men but it was quite tricky for a bit as the large males weigh over a 100 kilos, are immensely strong and although we



To get a blood sample: first catch your dragon in a cage trap or noose, then restrain it (Credit: Nicolas Cegalerba) so Claudio can take his sample while making sure you avoid irate males which can run nearly as fast as a man

didn't know it at the time it's recently been discovered that they have two glands in the lower jaw which secrete several toxic proteins. One German lady, who was visiting at the same time, was bitten on her behind and died five days later since no antibiotic was successful as, at that time, it was believed that the dragon's mouth was just full of bacteria and not poisonous.

In the mid 1990s Claudio Ciofi, now a biologist at the University of Florence, arrived in Indonesia to complete a PhD in dragon genetics¹⁰⁴. He was my postgraduate student at DICE and given the choice of working on tortoises in southern France or the dragons he had no hesitation! In 1999 he won the Whitley Award¹⁰⁵.

Inception

The evening classes continued all over the county, where my programme was running courses in every venue, provided an education in human behaviour. Extremely tiring and I often felt so exhausted that I was once pulled over by the Kent police in case I was drunk as it was always at

104 Ciofi, C., Beaumont, M.A., Swingland, I.R. & Bruford, M.W. (1999) Genetic divergence and units for conservation in the Komodo dragon *Varanus komodoensis*. *Proc. Roy. Soc. Lond. B.* **266(1435)**: 2269.

105 The Whitley Awards, often known as the 'Green Oscars', are held annually by the Whitley Fund for Nature to recognise and celebrate effective grassroots conservation leaders across the Global South.