

'IGUANA' IN VLISSINGEN

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Other than big zoos and private snake collections, where the visitor is invited by the owner, there are not many reptile exhibitions to visit in The Netherlands. In a former volume the herpetological undertaking of Walter Getreuer has been reported (Van der Voort, 1993), now we are pleased to inform you about an interesting initiative in Vlissingen. 'Serpo' was an exclusive snake-business, reptile zoo *Iguana* offers also an interesting excursion to lovers of other reptiles.

A few years ago *Iguana* was mentioned in the booklet 'Er op uit' of the Dutch Railways, in the latest edition it is not mentioned. This is due to such an increase in the number of visitors, that advertising is not really necessary anymore. The number of people interested in the exhibition, primarily an animal reception centre has now passed the 70,000 per annum. That is a number that would be envied by many other institutions in The Netherlands.



Foto 1: Expositieruimte van Iguana met terraria voor slangen.
Exhibition room in Iguana showing snake terraria.

Foto: Fons Sleijpen.

A new record is not really wanted, although it is very satisfactory for the co-workers that there is so much interest in their initiative.

Such a number of people could not possibly be accommodated anymore in the original reception centre at 'BellamyPark', therefore, *Iguana* has recently finished building a considerable extension and rebuilding program. It was started in 1991 and two years later had included an area consisting of two more houses than initially was the case and the whole area has increased to a size of four and a half times the original centre. Such an area has made it possible to extend the route extensively through all three buildings.

'Iguana' does not receive a building subsidy, however, the municipality Vlissingen together with the province of Zeeland has subsidized 40% of the costs involved with the rebuilding - Hfl 1.200.000,-. Since *Iguana* could and had to bear the expenses of the remaining 60%, the popularity of the exhibition is essential.

The charge for admission to the reptile zoo is intentionally very low: Hfl 5,50. Even the prices charged in the new canteen are more than competitive with the catering trade in Vlissingen. The philosophy behind this is that people should not get the feeling that there is too large a made profit from their visit to *Iguana*, that's why so many return again.

'Iguana' is run by seven full-time co-workers together with a 15-20 part-time co-workers.

This is enough of the introduction. Now the exhibition. Those who enter *Iguana* set eyes, after admiring the giant pythons housed in a huge terrarium near the cash-desk, on a notice-board:

Welcome to reptile zoo Iguana. Iguana is a reception centre for reptiles, amphibians and arthropods. A part of the animals that are brought in you can see in this exhibition. Our priority is to bring these animals back into nature. Unfortunately, this is often impossible due to the destruction of their biotope. Sometimes we succeed in returning the animals to their country of origin and to set them free in nature. Animals that are handicapped stay in Iguana. Therefore, you will also see animals here that lack a leg or eye. From a hygienic point of view we specifically use plastic plants and ground cover. This is not harmful to the animals. On the contrary, infections hardly occur in clean terraria. Iguana has gained a reputation for its successful breeding results, many times the first in the world. This is a sign that the animals are happy. Since we don't want to use poison and yet want to get rid of inconvenient insects, nine tokeh's (geckoes) are set free in the reptile zoo to catch flies and such like. During the day they are normally asleep, but in the evening they are looking for food.

After this notice-board the visitor is taken passed the terraria via a well-thought out route. Room in, room out, upstairs and downstairs, without swimming against the stream or crossing the same rooms many times, all animals can be quietly seen. Near to this new surprises often occur. For example, the courtyard between the three buildings is roofed over and converted as if by magic to a subtropical sun-room housing animals from temperate zones. The fact that in this way three entire buildings -one of these used to be a primary school!- are crossed from the cellar to the second floor, clearly states how extensive the exhibition is. In total, about 120 to 125 different species of reptiles, amphibians and arthropods are shown.

The animals are housed in very large, well maintained and clean terraria. The furnishing is often quite sober and is in practically not in one case an accurate reflection of the actual habitat. However, it facilitates viewing the animals by the visitors and also the cleaning of the terraria by the co-workers. This cleaning is no sinecure with such a large number of animals. The liveliness of most of the animals suggests that they have adapted to and are fully used to the excitement and animation passing them by on a daily basis.

Explanations about the exhibited animals is restricted to a small notice-board for each terrarium saying the name, place of origin and sometimes a few facts of information. Perhaps they are a bit brief for the interested layman, but this will change in the next few years. Now the big rebuilding is finished, more attention will be paid to additional text and explanations in a didactically responsible way. For example, there are plans for a small film- and videoroom to improve the information available to the public, because despite the exhibition set-up of *Iguana*, they remain true to their original principles, i.e. protecting and improving the status of reptiles and amphibians in the world.

In total, the foundation takes care of about 150 to 160 species, however, a number are kept outside Vlissingen. In this facility the breeding of rodents takes place, necessary for food-supply. What is needed annually, is nicely explained by illustrating the appetite of the five giant tiger pythons encountered by the visitor on the top-floor: these five snakes need 350 to 400 rabbits annually. The giant snakes are never fed during visiting-time, this always takes place at night. In the back of the huge terrarium, hiding-places (of about 2.5 x 1.5 m) are located as many snakes are present. All animals except for one are lured to these places. This snake is fed till it has had enough, after which all the other animals are fed successively. They are exclusively fed with death rabbits: practice has shown that the first prey is killed, but the second is not anymore. This means a lot of suffering for the rabbits and therefore they are killed before entering the terrarium.

'Iguana' is a national reception centre for reptiles. As a result animals are obtained in very different ways: a reptile enthusiast finds that his crocodile has grown rather big and that he doesn't have the room for the animal, or, a snake has turned up in a wood-stack from one or other tropical country; the police encounter a lot of illegal reptiles which have to be housed, or, an escaped animal is spotted somewhere and finally ends up in Vlissingen. Harbour authorities ask for the presence of *Iguana* co-workers, when it is known that there are unexpected snakes present on a ship. Also the Dutch Customs sometimes procures reptiles which are taken to *Iguana*.

It is annoying that the co-workers are often confronted with irresponsible behaviour: a turtle in a channel or a tortoise along the highway: 'lovers' clearly had to get rid of their pets. Hence, *Iguana* works industriously in collaboration with other organisations, to change the attitude of people. An example of which has succeeded to achieve a small improvement in the attitude of people towards red eared pond sliders. The sale of these vulnerable animals to private persons has decreased notably in that time. Meanwhile, new parents have shown up, who easily purchase these animals which are difficult to keep alive, for their children. Striving for a change in attitude seems to be a never ending saga.

In cases of emergency individuals gladly make use of the herpetological and entomological knowledge of the co-workers. Jan Bom told recently about a telephone call that came from Saigon. The deck of a ship was covered with scorpions: what could be done?

In principle *Iguana* does not sell animals. The foundation does not only strive to round up and take care of reptiles, but also especially places back the animals in their countries of origin. A part of this strategy is breeding animals using strong and healthy groups. For obtaining some success in this, they can truly be proud. Some results of the successful breeding attempts can be admired in the nursery. Here, the eggs are hatched, using a number of discarded hospital incubators. Of course, it happens now and again, that the number of a certain species grows too large by captive breeding. In that case, a solution has to be found first by contacting colleague organisations, especially zoos, only in extreme emergencies are animals sold to private persons.

As has already been said the animals are returned to their country of origin if possible. Success has been achieved in returning tortoises to Tanzania and Greece. This is a very complicated procedure and does not happen by accident. A detailed research precedes

the release. At the time of writing this article the return of a number of tortoises to the place of origin was being arranged. Due to political circumstances it was quite impossible. However, contacts have been made with other countries in which the species is native, but nearly extinct. With the help of the WNF it may be possible for *Iguana* to join a French organisation which is already busy with such work in Senegal, Africa, starting a sanctuary there for the tortoises. When these animals are released just anywhere, their chance of survival is very small: they are seen as food or trade and in both cases their lives will be very short. In April co-workers of *Iguana* will assess the situation on the spot and decide whether it is significant to continue with this organisation, because one needs to know as certain as possible that nothing untoward will happen to the animals. From the Canadian government the organisation received f 100.000,-, which has been used to fence a future sanctuary of 15 hectares.

Altogether, reptile zoo *Iguana* is worth more than just a visit, especially for those whose interest is mainly snakes. Although Vlissingen is for most of you not closeby, *Iguana* is situated in the centre of Vlissingen and easily reached by public or private transport. *Iguana* is open during the whole year, except for Christmas day and 1 January. For the exact opening hours one should phone *Iguana*, 01184-17219.



Foto 2: *Python regius*. Inwoner van Iguana. Inhabitant of Iguana.

Foto: Fons Sleijpen.