

Australian Reptile Conservation Update.

by Raymond T.Hoser,  
41, Village Avenue,  
Doncaster,  
Vic., 3108,  
Australia.

Problems with the conservation of Australia's herpetofauna in the past have been well documented. This includes problems of habitat destruction, pest species, so-called protective legislation and problems with corrupt fauna officers, ( Cumming, 1981; Ehmann & Cogger, 1985; Hoser, 1988, 1989a, 1989b). Some recent happenings in Australia are reported here.

The Fauna Authorities, Regulations and Recent Corruption.

Hoser (1989b) and Pickett (1985) note the counterproductive nature of restrictive so-called protective legislation. Within Australia, over the last 3 years (up to mid-1989), State Fauna Authorities who are responsible for the statutory protection of our wildlife have continued to act overall in a counterproductive manner, with respect to reptile conservation.

Notably, seriously endangered species such as the Western Short-necked tortoise, *Pseudemydura umbrina*, continue to decline, and are apparently being virtually ignored by the authorities. Meanwhile herpetologists are often being unduly harassed by overzealous or corrupt fauna officers, usually when keeping common species. Break-ins and thefts of legally held specimens continues to be a problem in more than one state.

Weigal (1988) in his book, "Care of Australian Reptiles in Captivity" apparently pre-empted changes to the N.S.W. National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) reptile protection legislation. These changes were to have been the result of several years of negotiation between the Reptile Keepers Association (RKA) and NPWS. Weigal, an office bearer of the RKA, published the proposed changes without NPWS consent, and apparently in a show of displeasure NPWS refused to enact the proposed changes. The timing of the NPWS backdown was very suspicious to say the least.

A historical perspective will explain why. In 1973 New South Wales NPWS enacted so-called protective legislation for reptiles. It was essentially a prohibition on keeping reptiles in captivity.

Those who collected, kept or carried out research on reptiles were invited to apply to NPWS and obtain permits to cover their activities, reptiles held and similar. Most, if not all keepers complied with the new regulations and obtained the necessary permits. Their details, including stock held, were all put into a central register. Starting in late 1976 NPWS officials commenced 'raids' on collections, seizing large numbers of reptiles. The reptiles were often seized illegally, and on a number of occasions, when NPWS officials were caught breaking in, or after the reptiles resurfaced where they shouldn't have been, they were returned to their rightful owners ( Hoser, 1989b; Cumming, 1981 ). One man, (Peter Joseph Marzol), who was involved in a break-in and the theft of specimens, files with evidence of Australian snakes being taken by the NPWS from collections here and being re-sold in West Germany and the United States, diaries and other valuables from my house on May 8th, 1981, was later charged by the Crown for alleged corruption involving the murder of a woman, ( Anonymous, 1986a, 1986b ).

The cases involving Marzol, (mainly those not involving myself), and allegations against Taronga Zoo officials, NPWS officials, and others indicated that corruption in the authorities was a huge problem, (see Hoser, 1989b, pp. 234-235, for 3 columns of corruption related references, many of which cite further references). A number of important Royal Commissions further highlighted problems and named individuals associated with the NPWS and associated Government departments.

Due to a fear of NPWS harassment and thefts of specimens, most keepers in New South Wales had, by the late 1970's, adopted a policy of avoiding contact with the NPWS if at all possible. In simple terms this meant that new ( post-1973 ) keepers of reptiles kept them without notifying the NPWS of the fact. In most cases these people were free from NPWS harassment, (Hoser, 1989b).

After the 1981 break-in into my facility and theft of snakes, and similar problems faced by many others in Sydney, an association, the RKA, was formed in a bid to unite and protect other reptile holders from these types of problems.

During 1988 the RKA arranged with NPWS officials to change their policies with respect to those who hold captive reptiles. The idea was supposedly to be that the NPWS would no longer carry out systematic break-ins for reptiles, and that 'contract orders' would no longer exist. The NPWS declared an amnesty for all those who held reptiles without a permit(s), (the overwhelming majority). These people were encouraged to obtain permits and register with the NPWS anything they held.

Things seemed to be going well until the next NPWS clampdown, which incidently I predicted. Allegedly due to discontent with Weigal's book, NPWS officials clamped down on reptile keepers, and the 'raids' started again in earnest. This situation was essentially a re-run of the situation of 1973 onwards. This time however, NPWS officials had used the amnesty as a tool to increase the number of collections from where to source their reptiles.

For bird keepers, their situation paralleled that of the reptile keepers. A supposed loosening of NPWS policy, only to be followed by a 'clamp down'. The journal *Australian Birdkeeper* is a constant source of information regarding the problems ornithologists face at the hands of the NPWS.

In the August 1989 issue of *Australian Birdkeeper*, the editor, Nigel Steele-Boyce, summed up the situation when he opened his editorial with the statement "It seems an issue does not go by without some form of dissatisfaction being levelled at National Parks and Wildlife Services, and unfortunately this issue is no different." He then goes on to talk about a number of problems including an ICAC investigation into alleged corruption in the NPWS. Here I have to explain the ICAC. In 1988 the Unsworth/Wran Labour government of N.S.W. was defeated at an election, in which the principal issue was corruption within government authorities, as brought into the open by media reports and later Royal Commissions. Few government departments were untouched, with corruption being alleged all over the place, and Royal Commissions finding 'dirt' virtually everywhere they looked.

Newly elected Premier Nick Griener, who promised an end to corruption, appointed a new 'Independant Commission Against Corruption' - ICAC. It was to be modelled on a similar organisation in Hong Kong, and was to investigate corruption in Government departments. It was inevitable that the NPWS would come under scrutiny. Although I was approached by the ICAC shortly after its formation to give evidence against NPWS officials my submission to them hasn't yet been finalised.

The NPWS became the subject of at least two ICAC investigations, both alleging top level corruption within NPWS. At the same time the NPWS were apparently spending money they didn't have, and another investigation was launched into the senior management of the service. As a result of adverse findings, the minister Tim Moore sacked the NPWS director, Mr. Whitehouse, late in August this year. A motion of 'no confidence' in senior NPWS officials had also been passed by a number of other NPWS employees, indicating serious trouble within the NPWS.

There is also a continuing investigation into the licencing procedure of the NPWS. Apparently a private zoo west of Sydney obtained permits for wildlife it should not have received. This case was documented throughout the local media. The issue came to a head because scientists had been refused vitally important permits that should have been issued at the same time that the zoo owner received his. Earlier licencing 'anomalies', including the the well documented Craig Bennett case, will no doubt be subject to further scrutiny.

The August 1989 issue of *Australian Birdkeeper* also referred to a five year plan by NPWS to phase out birdkeeping. At least one senior NPWS official (Keith Muelette) has indicated a similar desire for reptile keepers in New South Wales.

A problem faced by both bird and reptile keepers in N.S.W. (and Queensland) is the apparent ban on 'movements'. A movement is the trade or release of protected fauna. Breeding programs become useless if breeders are unable to offload surplus stock. Melbourne snake breeder Brian Barnett is unable to supply New South Wales and Queensland keepers with desperately needed captive bred snakes, (mainly Scrub pythons, *Morelia amethistina*, and other pythons). The NPWS (NSW & Qld) ban on movements is unconstitutional. The national constitution guarantees free trade between the states, which obviously includes legally held or obtained reptiles. The ban by NPWS of 'movements' is hurting Barnett in more ways than one - his snakes sell for an average of \$350 each, and with several hundred specimens, (about 200 surplus), he needs to offload what he has as quickly as possible to make way for next season's offspring.

Bob Irwin of Queensland Reptile Park separates the sexes to prevent breeding, and kills eggs laid by snakes due to the refusal of the Queensland NPWS to allow him to offload the young to other collectors, or even release them back into the wild.

Institutions within New South Wales (which has more herpetologists and reptile keepers than all other states combined) are similarly affected, with large numbers of young being killed at or near to birth. In another issue of *Australian Birdkeeper*, the NPWS of N.S.W. were blamed for the eradication of all captive Orange Bellied Parrots, *Neophema chrysogaster*, which were in the 1970's being bred in large numbers in aviaries. Now facing extinction, an independant report has called for the immediate re-establishment of the captive breeding of this bird.

1989 has not only seen the NPWS of N.S.W. under the spotlight for corruption related activities and allegations. Derryn Hinch, a current affairs reporter, showed NPWS officials shooting supposedly protected Lyrebirds, *Menura novaehollandiae*. In March, 1989, on his TV show at 7.00 pm, on Channel 7, a NPWS official was asked why he was shooting the birds. His reply was 'This is the easiest way of catching them.' Needless to say the birdkeeping lobby got very upset over this. NPWS officials have also in recent times overseen the large scale killing of Broad-shelled tortoises, *Chelodina expansa*, allegedly for research purposes.

The Queensland NPWS are still attempting to regain credibility after the Julian Ford fiasco, in which the well known scientist died after alleging corruption within the Qld. NPWS, and was unduly harassed. Ford's wife Jennifer blamed his fatal heart attack on the NPWS and their 'mafia style' harassment, (Livingstone, 1987a, 1987b). The Julian Ford case has been reported in detail on the 60 Minutes current affairs program.

Nationwide, herpetologists have been dogged by constant changes to the so-called protective legislation. On a national basis (7 states plus 1 territory) it is effectively impossible to keep up to date on current reptile (and other wildlife) protective laws and licencing procedures. Despite some pressure from hobbyists there has been no desire by the Authorities to standardise procedures between the states. Books that print protective legislation for wildlife are invariably out of date with respect to these before they are published.

#### Other Problems;

The description of a number of new reptile species, often as a result of splitting up already known taxa, is causing further problems. Some forms, now recognised as species in their own right, are apparently under threat as a result of various human related activities. The conservation status of a number of little known reptiles remain similarly poorly known. An example of this group is *Morelia carinata*, the Rough-scaled Carpet python, now apparently known from two dead specimens captured in a remote part of north west Western Australia.

The Pink-tailed Legless lizard, *Aprasia parapulchella*, is now under threat from the continuing urban sprawl of Canberra. This species is only known to occur in large numbers from Coppins Crossing (a single locality), at the fringe of the city, and further development in this area may threaten the species. No habitat protection program for this species is yet in force.

Cane toads, *Bufo marinus*, continue their spread. As their range increases more reptile, frog and other species decline, and in many cases die out. The southern spread of the toads seems to have slowed, with toads now occurring south of Grafton, N.S.W. Toads are spreading into western Queensland along some of the river valleys. Further north toads have been progressing across the Gulf of Carpentaria, which they have nearly traversed, and in the not too distant future will probably make their appearance into Arnhem land. The current 30 km per year spread of the toads along the Gulf of Carpentaria will probably accelerate as toads find other parts of coastal Northern Australia more favourable for their spread.

*Australian Birdkeeper* June 1989 reports a new theory for the spread of Cane toads, this being facilitated by water birds. In the column 'Mynah mutterings' it is reported that "Scientists believe that the eggs of the Cane toad, which are laid in string-like links, may be picked up inadvertently by waterbirds on their feet and transported long distances around the country.". Fortunately the toads haven't appeared in widely scattered localities yet, so that theory seems to be an unlikely reality.

There have also been a few recent press reports of a 'new' toad specific virus being tested, which will, hopefully, aid in the eradication of this species from Australia.

A number of 'splinter smuggling' attempts have been reported in the Australian media over the last two years. A Frankfurt based business man, Horst Selig, was arrested at Sydney airport in November 1988, with two suitcases containing 27 Australian parrots and 11 lizards. The reptiles were cooled with ice-packs to keep them still, and included Blue tongues, *Tiliqua sp.*, Shinglebacks, *Trachydosaurus rugosus*, and Eastern water dragons, *Physignathus lesueurii*. The birds were drugged to tranquilise them. The mortality rate amongst both birds and reptiles was apparently high, indicating that Selig was not experienced in smuggling. According to Craig, (1989), who covered the case in detail, the man was sentenced to two and a half years in jail by the Sydney District Court, late in April 1989. He had no minimum term set. Selig apparently admitted to Customs officers that he'd been paid \$5,000 to be a courier after he had been apprehended trying to board a flight to Bangkok. Horst Selig was the fourth person to be convicted of smuggling offences by Customs officials in less than one year. At least one more Australian was facing smuggling charges in April 1989.

A month later, in late May, an American herpetologist was arrested at Sydney airport with two suitcases containing over fifty reptiles. He was en-route from New Guinea to the U.S.A. The reptiles included Bismark Ringed pythons, *Bothrochilus boa*, White-lipped pythons, *Liasis albertisi* and Mangrove monitors, *Varanus indicus*. The seized reptiles were donated to Sydney's Taronga Zoo, which became the only place in Australia to hold Ringed pythons, *B.boa*.

Also in April 1989 three West Germans appeared before a Melbourne court charged with attempting to smuggle 32 birds in two suitcases from Tullamarine airport. According to Ryan (1989) the 27 Long-billed Corellas, *Cacatua tenuirostris*, and 5 Galahs, *Cacatua roseicapilla*, were worth \$6,000 each on the black market. The three were bailed after each agreed to post \$10,000 cash deposits and on condition that they appeared in Melbourne Magistrates Court on July 24th. As well as surrendering their passports, the three men had to report to Police daily until the hearing date. The three men apparently skipped the country in late May after having false passports sent to them from West Germany. Not only did they face smuggling charges, but they also faced drug charges resulting from their administering of local anaesthetic to the birds to quieten them down. According to federal police the 3 faced up to 10 years in jail if convicted, however due to the unusual extradition treaty between West Germany and Australia, it was unlikely that the trio would ever be prosecuted.

A fourth man, a Melbourne local, also faced court for his alleged involvement in that smuggling attempt.

On a more positive note, environmental issues in Australia have greatly increased in prominence. As well as an increase in the number of environmental organisations, existing organisations such as Greenpeace and the Australian Conservation Foundation, (ACF), have averaged a three-fold increase in membership over the last three years. This will certainly rub off into herpetological conservation and research. Both Bob Hawke (The Prime Minister) and Andrew Peacock (Opposition leader) have made important environmental policy statements in the form of manifestos, and although their statements when scrutinised closely lack what is really needed to protect the Australian environment, they are a major step in the right direction.

Cogger and Ehmann (1985) refer to the need to have 'protection' for protection's sake, and a more 'thought out' environmental/conservation policy. Tyler (1979), possibly Australia's most well known frog expert, argued for protective measures for six species of frog he viewed as endangered, with non-protection (by law, relating to collection and keeping only) of all other species. Today, in 1989, more people are echoing similar sentiments.

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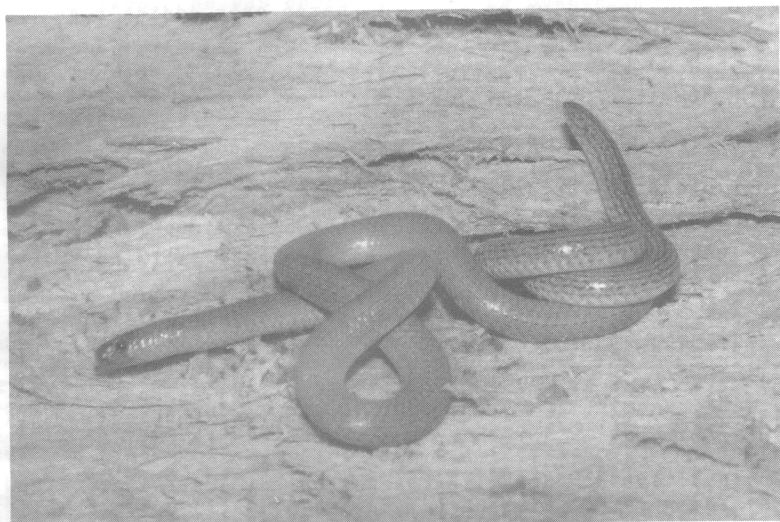


Plate 1. Pink-tailed Legless lizard, *Aprasia parapulchella*.  
From Coppins Crossing, ACT. (see Hoser)