Iguana farming

When you think of animal farming, cows, sheep, goats, horses, pigs, chickens and ducks probably come to mind.

Most people are aware that nowadays many types of fish are also farmed - in Europe at least 15 different types. What is more, so-called "alternative farming" has come to a lot of people's notice, and a quick search on the Internet can come up with sites about the farming of ostriches, llamas, deer, kangaroos, bison and even crocodiles. But what about farming lizards? And not only for their skins, to make into shoes or handbags, but for food?

The green iguana

Physical Appearance: Full-grown green iguanas are usually between four and six feet, although they have been known to grow up to seven feet long. This includes the tail, however, which can make up about half the body length and, in addition to its green colour, has black stripes. Green iguanas, not surprisingly, are green in colour, but can be found in many different shades ranging from bright green, to a dull, greyish-green. Their skin is rough, with a set of pointy scales along the iguana's back. Green iguanas have long fingers and claws to help them climb and grasp.

Geographic Range: The green iguana is found over a large geographic area, from Mexico to southern Brazil and Paraguay, as well as on the Caribbean Islands.

Habitat: Iguanas live in tropical rainforest areas, generally in lower altitudes in areas near water sources, such as rivers or streams. They spend most of their time high in the forest canopy, about 40-50 feet above the ground.

Behaviour: Iguanas are diurnal, meaning that they are awake during the day. They are also cold-blooded, which means they do not produce their own body heat. In other words, if it is cold, the iguana is cold too. So to stay warm, green iguanas bask in the sun, lying on warm rocks as they soak up the sun's heat.

Source: *The Wild Ones Animal Index*

Iguanas or cattle?

The green iguana, also known as "bamboo chicken" or "chicken of the tree", has been used as a source of food in Central and South America for up to 7000 years. However, in many of the regions where they are indigenous, a combination of factors has meant that they are now listed as an endangered species.

Firstly, the iguanas' behaviour does not help their cause. When an iguana feels threatened, its natural reaction is to drop out of a tree and into water below, where it will wait for the threat to pass. But humans are more intelligent than other predators, and will go into the water, where it is easy to catch the iguanas.

Secondly, the best catch for a hunter is a pregnant female. Consequently, the number of female iguanas that are of reproductive age has been greatly reduced.

Added to these factors is the problem of deforestation. In some parts of Central and South America, such as the vast pampas of Argentina, the natural habitat is ideal for farming cattle. However, in many other areas, forest must be cleared to provide pastures for the cattle to graze. Cutting down forests, as environmentalists are well aware, can have devastating effects, such as erosion, reduced water resources and a decrease in soil fertility. It has also contributed decisively to the sharp fall in the iguana population.

If estimates are true that iguanas can yield as much protein per unit area as cattle, then it seems to make good sense to concentrate on the restoration and protection of tropical forests for food and habitat, and farm the native iguanas rather than the intruding cattle.

How to farm iguanas

"The key elements of iguana farming are reproduction in captivity, controlled incubation, and raising hatchlings in captivity. Once the hatchlings are seven months old, they are released into forested areas on farms, where they grow to harvestable size in two additional years.

To create the farms, enclosures are constructed using sheet-metal walls sunk 30 cm into the ground. Inside, the animals sleep in shelters made of bamboo and other vegetation. Each shelter has an adjustable entrance slit through which young lizards can slither, but predators, which are usually larger, cannot. Most enclosures are set on stilts and food is served in the shade underneath. With this system, 20 to 60 young iguanas are kept in a 10 square metre area. The iguana farms also include an artificial nest consisting of a "tunnel" leading to a sand-filled, egg-laying chamber. Both tunnel and chamber are made of predator-safe material and are easily accessible by the farmer.

Artificial nests increase the number of hatched eggs and their survival rate to 90%, versus 50% in the wild. Using food supplements (iguana chow), it is estimated that the population can be maintained at 6 to 10 times the level possible in a rainforest, or around 50 adult iguanas per hectare. Iguana chow is a mixture of broken rice, meat, bone, and fish meal, papayas, mangos, bananas, avocados, as well as a variety of leaves and flowers. Smallholders can erect simple feeding stations and keep them stocked with table scraps or weedy vegetation. This makes for low-cost production before the iguanas reach harvesting size."

Source: *Iguana Farming - A Source of Food and a Method of Tropical Forest Preservation*

Where are iguanas being farmed?

The pioneer of iguana farming is Dr Dagmar Werner, a German herpetologist, who founded the Pro Iguana Verde Foundation. She is currently working with six Panamanian communities, and is involving others in Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala. Countries that have expressed interest in her program include El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia and Venezuela.

The Foundation has set up "Iguana Park" near Orotina in Costa Rica, which is both an eco-tourism facility and a place to demonstrate and undertake further research on the sustainable use of forests.

In Belize, the Belize Zoo started its Iguana Breeding Program, designed so the typical Belizean could raise iguanas for food.

And in the La Mosquitia rainforest in Honduras, there is an Iguana Vigilantes group, whose motto is "The iguana is our heritage, our future. We have to take care of it."

With initiatives like these, we can only hope that the future of iguana farming is assured.