

Lizard Search on the **CAPE VERDE ISLANDS**

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This Issue's "Spineless Wonders" Topic:
The Jerusalem Cricket
(aka the "Potato Bug")



Don't Regret the Ones That Get Away



Russ Case

In many issues of REPTILES, we present stories about intrepid explorers venturing to distant lands to find the reptiles of their dreams. The mail we receive in response offers a variety of opinion. Some people don't like these types of stories; their letters indicate that they will never be able to take such trips. Other readers, even though they admit they aren't likely to embark on exotic herp-hunting adventures, consider themselves armchair travelers and enjoy reading about foreign lands regardless.

Sometimes we get mail from people who are envious about all the wonderful reptiles and amphibians that are discovered during these globe-trotting jaunts. These letter writers may go on to say that they have gone on herp-hunting expeditions (local or foreign) but were not able to find the reptilian treasures they were after. The letter writers may feel disappointed.

It is with this last group in mind that I refer you to this issue's article "In Search of *Macroscoincus*

coctei" by Jim Pether (see page 70). Jim was very anxious to travel to the Cape Verde Islands off the coast of Africa to find the large, and possibly extinct, skink *M. coctei*. Not to ruin the article for you, but Jim doesn't find the lizard. To this date, it's not known for certain whether it's extinct or not (there are still some nooks and crannies on the islands that need to be searched).

Even though Jim doesn't find the lizard he's after, his tale is still an interesting and entertaining one, and there are two reasons his article is in the magazine. One is to inform you about *Macroscoincus coctei*, a lizard I'm sure some of you will be hearing about for the first time. The other is to illustrate that many people, even seasoned herpers like Jim Pether, return home without finding their target species, yet who remain enriched by the experience.

To those of you who are out in the field searching for herps, whether you're down the street from your home or in distant countries, I hope you are doing so because you love the notion of being outdoors, and that to find what you're after is really the icing on the cake. Let's face it: It's great to find herps, but isn't the simple act of searching for them fun, too? **!**

DICK BARTLETT is a herpetologist/herpetoculturist who has written more than 425 articles, three books and, with his wife Patti, an additional 10 books. He lectures extensively, and has participated in field studies across North and Latin America. In 1970, Bartlett began the Reptilian Breeding and Research Institute (RBRI). Since its inception, more than 150 reptile and amphibian species have been bred at the private facility, some for the first time in the United States under captive conditions.

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JERRY G. WALLS is perhaps best known as the founder and former editor of *Reptile Hobbyist* magazine and the author of two dozen books and more than 300 articles on reptiles and amphibians in the terrarium. He recently returned to Louisiana after 30 years in New Jersey, a move that is allowing him to reacquaint himself with wild herps, spectacular insects and (his favorite) crawfish.

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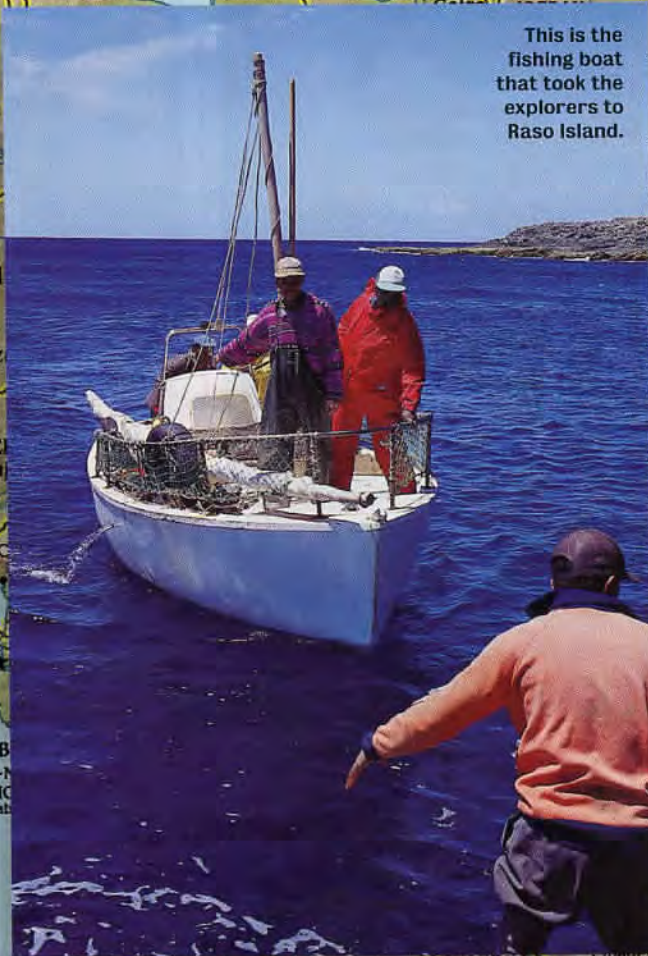
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In Search of *Macroscoineus* *coctei*

This is the fishing boat that took the explorers to Raso Island.



Visit Raso Island in a quest to find this reportedly extinct skink.

by jim pether

It's funny how a series of coincidences can lead to a specific event in your life.

Before I moved to the Canary Islands in 1986, I had never heard of the Cape Verde Islands or of *Macroscincus coctei* (giant Cape Verde skink). However, in no time at all I would become quite familiar with both.

I first heard about the Cape Verde Islands and *Macroscincus* while listening to a conversation with my two partners, who

It seemed that nobody had seen this giant skink for more than 60 years, although stubborn rumors existed that it still survived on some of the smaller islands in the Cape Verde Group.

were discussing if the lizard was still alive somewhere in the wild. It seemed that nobody had seen this giant skink for more than 60 years, although stubborn rumors existed that it still survived on some of the smaller islands in the Cape Verde Group.

My interest was to be aroused again the following year when Hermann Schleich visited my Reptilandia Park in Galdar, Gran Canaria (one of the Canary Islands) with a group of his students. Eventually, our conversation got around to Cape Verde (the country of Cape Verde is comprised of 14 islands) and *Macroscincus*. It seemed that Schleich had spent several years working on the herpetofauna of the islands, including searching for *Macroscincus*. He was quite adamant that it was extinct. Schleich had visited all of the smaller islands and had not found even a single trace of the lizard.

After he left, I started thinking a little more about Cape Verde. The problem would be getting there, because there are no connections between the two groups of islands.

Several years later, my business partner was in London, visiting the British Natural History Museum, and was lucky enough to see the holotype for *Macroscincus coctei*. He took some photos (see pp. 76 and 80-81), so I could at least see what it used to look like. It was similar in some ways to the giant monkey skink (*Corucia zeburata*).

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Macroscincus bones have been found on the Cape Verde Islands, leading to hope that the lizard still exists somewhere on some of the islands.



Tarentola gigas was abundant on the island. Note the author's sunburned fingers.



Owl pellets contained various reptilian and avian bones, but no traces of *Macroscincus coctei*.

Snake Oil Expedition

One summer in the late 1980s, two Germans visited my reptile park. I learned that they were on their way to the Cape Verde Islands — by car! I presumed that they would cross over to Morocco and drive down the west coast of Africa to Senegal and cross from there. To my surprise, their Land-Rover had "Expedition *Macroscoincus*" painted down both of its sides.

One of them, a guy named Schulman, was convinced that the giant skink still survived. His plan was to not only find it, but set up a reptile breeding center on the islands. He wanted to captive breed various species, and asked if I would like to swap some with him. I told him I'd swap anything I had for some *Macroscoincus*. And off they went.

I thought that would be the last I'd hear of them, but six months later I received a letter from Schulman, asking if I could send him some Canarian lizards and a pair of mar-mosets. To my amazement, he also said that he had rediscovered *Macroscoincus*. This got me excited. Unable to reach him by phone, I eagerly wrote that I would send him what he wanted in exchange for the skinks.

Imagine my surprise when, a couple of months later, I received a price list from Herr Schulman. The first animals on his list were captive-bred *Macroscoincus coctei* at \$100 each! This made me suspicious, but I heard nothing more of Schulman and never saw hair nor hide of a *Macroscoincus*.

Take Me to Cape Verde

By now, I was gagging to visit Cape Verde. I found out that I could fly direct to Dakar, Senegal, and then I could catch a flight to Praia (the capital of Cape Verde) on the isle of Santiago.

I was concerned about the flights and started having nightmares about old Dakota airplanes from the 1940s or, even worse, ancient Russian planes from the 1970s. In the end, it was all for nothing, because Cape Verde Airlines had just bought a couple of good old European ATR twin turboprop planes. Now I needed to find a companion to accompany me on the trip.

For the past five years, I had been visiting the United States to attend the International Herpetological Symposium. At several of these meetings, I spoke with a young guy from New York named Quetzal Dwyer. Quetzal was one of the few people who not only knew Cape Verde was, but he also knew about *Macroscoincus*.

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When I asked if he would be interested in a trip to Cape Verde, he jumped at the chance. So, in March of 1995, we set off on our adventure to Cape Verde.

After an uneventful flight to Dakar, Ben (a friend of a friend whose last name escapes me) met us at the steps of the aircraft. We passed quickly through customs and were

Snakes are missing from the Cape Verde Islands, however, skins are abundant, and we saw many species, including Stanger skins (*Mabuya stangeri*) and Delalandi skins (*M. delalandii*).

soon on our way to our hotel, as there were no connecting flights to Praia that night.

The next morning, after a pleasant two-hour flight, we got our first glimpse of the Cape Verde Islands. The dry, brown landscape contrasted against green coral reefs and the deep blue of the surrounding sea.

We landed, retrieved our luggage, passed through immigration and customs, and caught a taxi. After finding a hotel in town, we decided to rent a car and take a tour of the island.

In the northern parts of Santiago, we stopped to look for reptiles. Snakes are miss-

Another lizard that was found on Raso was *Tarentola caboverdiana raziana*.



JIM FETTER

ing from the Cape Verde Islands, however, skinks are abundant, and we saw many species, including Stanger skinks (*Mabuya stangeri*) and Delalandi skinks (*M. delalandii*). These prolific skinks occur all over the islands. Flipping over a few rocks we also found some small *Tarentola rudis* geckos.

We saw more skinks later, in a small forest. I was also surprised to find a group of toads. I was under the impression that there were no amphibians in the Cape Verde Islands; the land appeared too dry to support any. Later, I discovered the toads — *Bufo regularis* — were introduced from Senegal.

Further Preparations

We were eager to get to the smaller islands to start looking for *Macroscincus*. We booked a flight to Sao Nicolau, which is the nearest inhabited island to Raso and Branco. These small islands were the last places *Macroscincus* were known to occur, and we could only afford to visit one of them.

Once in Sao Nicolau, a mini bus took us on a hair-raising but beautiful ride over the mountains to the town of Tarrfal. From the beach in Tarrfal, we could see our intended goal: Raso.

We found a fisherman who was willing to take us to the island, but were horrified to learn that he wanted \$300 to do so. It was the sight of our goal, so temptingly close, that made up our minds to pay his fee (after a bout of useless bargaining attempts). We made plans to set out the next day.

The next morning, while loading supplies, I jumped from the boat to the dock



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A Short History of *Macroscincus coctei*

MACROSCINCUS OCCUR (OR OCCURRED) on the small Cape Verde islands of Raso, Branco and Santa Luzia. There is also evidence that they were on Sao Vicente and Sao Antao, where bones of a large lizard have also been found. These latter two islands are known as the Barovento Group and form part of the Cape Verde Archipelago. The islands are situated off the west coast of Africa opposite Senegal.

Macroscincus was first discovered by a Portuguese naturalist named Jose Da Silva Feijo in 1784. He sent various examples to the museum in Lisbon, Portugal. There they lay until 1809, when a stuffed specimen was taken by the French to a museum in Paris. Thirty years later, in 1839, the lizard was described by the famous French zoologists Dumeril and Bibron. They named the giant skink *Euprepes coctei* and put its locality as that of the African coast.

In 1873, a French voyager named Du Bocage noted the existence of a large lizard from Cape Verde. Shortly afterward, he was sent three live specimens: two adults and a juvenile. After studying the animals, he noted they were completely different from any other skinks described. He gave them the name *Macroscincus* (giant skink) and was the first person to maintain the skink in captivity. Du Bocage noted that two of the skinks died soon after they arrived. The third survived for almost four years on a vegetarian diet.

Toward the end of the century, Italian herpetologist M. G. Peracca obtained about 40 live skinks for terrariums he had set up on his country estate. He was able to observe and note morphological and behavioral habits of *Macroscincus*.

Peracca noted that several of the females he imported laid seven eggs over a period of 15 days, which were a brilliant white color. These eggs measured an average of 1½ inches in length. He was also able to record sexual differences. Males had much longer and wider heads and much longer hind limbs and tails. The tail of *Macroscincus* was prehensile and similar to *Corucia zebrata*. Many of the animals, especially the males, had regenerated tails.

There appears to have been three different color phases: gray, yellow and an intermediate phase. The gray morph had a dark gray back scattered with small brown spots, a brown to olive green head and light gray sides fading to whitish-yellow on the belly. The yellow morph had a yellowish-gray body with large black and brown spots that sometimes connected to form a dark background, gray sides, a whitish-yellow belly and a head with some large gray spots on the sides. The intermediate morph exhibited characteristics of the other two morphs.

These were the largest skinks known at the time. Males could attain a total length of 24 inches. Females were slightly smaller. Body length was around 12 inches, with the tail usually slightly longer than the body. *Macroscincus* was also partially nocturnal.

In 1898, an Italian naturalist named Leonardo Fea sent some animals from Raso to the museum in Genoa. He may be one of the last people to see *Macroscincus* alive in the wild. Several zoos had *Macroscincus* in their collections, and specimens and eggs in museums are noted as coming from the Rotterdam Zoo and London Zoo in the early 1900s. There is also a letter from a London animal dealer dated July 22, 1891, offering to the British Museum a list of animals, including "4 *Macroscincus coctei*" at £2 each. It seems that around that time a spate of skinks were collected from Branco and donated to different museums.

Collecting of these skinks for museums may have con-



and felt a severe pain shoot up my leg. I looked down to see blood pouring from my heel. A local told me of a health center nearby, so I hobbled off to obtain treatment. Quetzal caught up with me at the clinic. He wanted to call the trip off, but I was determined to go even if it meant I would have to hop around on a crutch.

Island Arrival

Back on board the boat, we hoisted the sail — made from old sugar bags emblazoned with "Gift from the USA," I noticed — and headed for Raso.

Two hours later, we arrived. There was no dock, so the captain had to maneuver the boat alongside a rock shelf that was exposed at low tide. Quetzal and I jumped from

We were told that during the rainy season there was ample vegetation.

Macroscincus is a vegetarian lizard, and we wondered if maybe it stays underground during the dry periods and comes out only when there is sufficient food.

the bow onto the rocks, and the crew passed us our supplies. We waved goodbye and reminded them to pick us up in four days.

Quetzal set off to find a suitable campsite. A few Iago sparrows (a Cape Verde endemic) were watching me, and to my surprise they came closer and closer. By now a small pool of blood had formed at my feet, which the birds started to drink. I figured they were looking for moisture, as Raso was completely dry.

After a couple of hours, and just as it was getting dark, Quetzal appeared at the top of the cliff with a big smile on his face and a cloth bag in his hand. The bastard had been collecting lizards and exploring the island. After I finished swearing at him, he climbed down and showed me what he had caught. Initially, I was excited that he might have found *Macroscincus*, but he was not that lucky.

He pulled a giant Cape Verde gecko (*Tarentola gigas*) from the bag. This turned out

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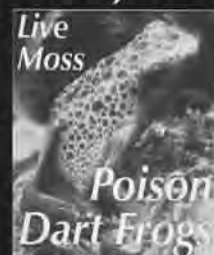


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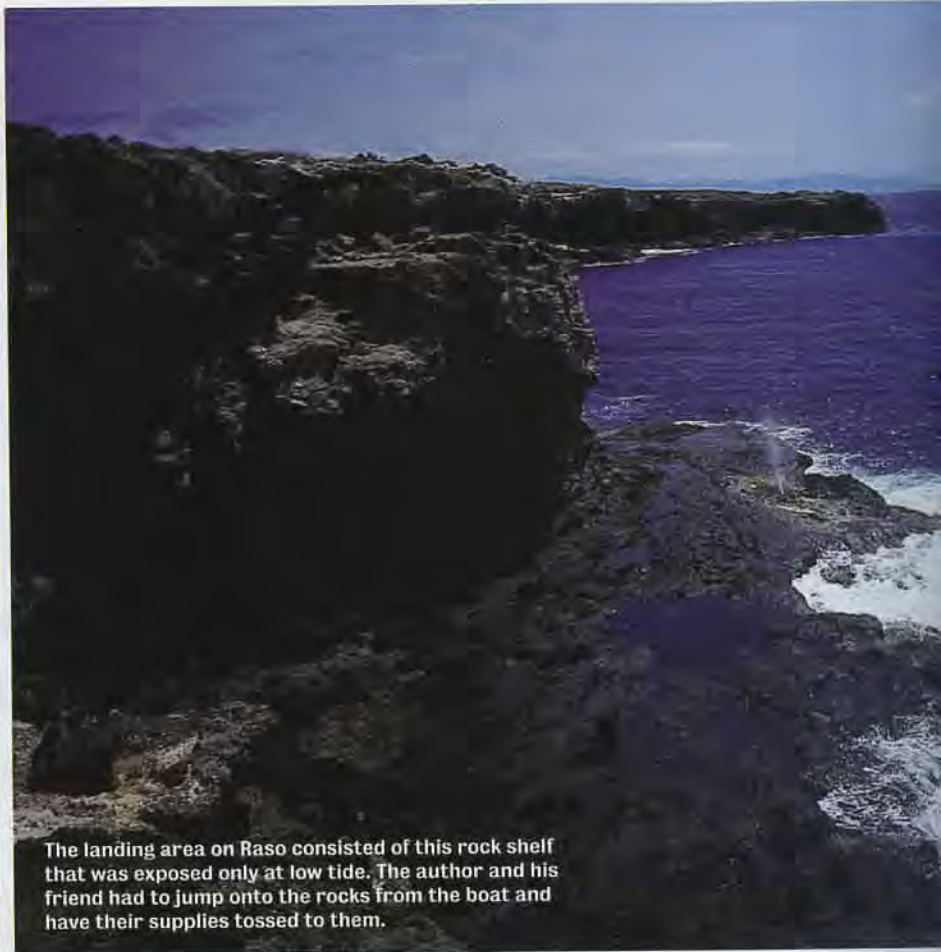
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The landing area on Raso consisted of this rock shelf that was exposed only at low tide. The author and his friend had to jump onto the rocks from the boat and have their supplies tossed to them.

to be a very common species, as evidenced by the many skeletons we later found (proof of just how harsh the conditions were on Raso). *Tarentola gigas* are bulky geckos that reach overall lengths of just over 10 inches and are dark gray to black in color. Females normally lay one large egg the size of a marble.

Quetzal also found another gecko: *Tarentola caboverdiana raziana*. This species is much smaller than *T. gigas*.

It was almost dark and we needed to find somewhere to sleep. We decided to photograph the geckos in the morning. Quetzal carried all our supplies up the cliff while I hobbled along looking for a campsite. Eventually, we found a narrow ledge with a small cave that provided a little shelter, though we were unable to pitch the tent due to the rocky ground, so we used it as a makeshift mattress instead.

I had obtained a severe sunburn during the boat trip, a result of the antibiotics I was taking for my foot injury. This was going to make things difficult for me — not only could I not walk very far due to my heel, but I could not go out in daylight. I fell asleep thinking *What am I doing here?*

Day One on Raso

When I awoke the next morning, I was surprised and delighted to see on Quetzal's sleeping head one of the small Iago sparrows. These birds were to be frequent visitors to our camp during our stay. We began putting out a bowl of water for them every day.

After breakfast, we planned our day. As I wasn't going to be of much use, we decided that Quetzal would search the island for *Macroscincus* and I would potter around the campsite and see what I could find. To avoid the sun, I had to dress from head to toe and completely cover my body. Quetzal lent me a woolen vest with a hood; the only problem was that it was black and became extremely hot. I found a small branch, made myself a crutch and, looking like a cross between Long John Silver and a bad boy from Queens, I set off looking for *Macroscincus*.

I found some more *Tarentola gigas* and also a *Hemidactylus bouvieri rasoensis*. This tiny gecko is only a couple of inches long, brown on top with dark bands and a white belly. We had now found all three gecko species that inhabited Raso.

Also abundant were Stanger skinks (*Mabuya stangeri*). They would enter our camp to be fed tomatoes and bananas.



JOHN PETERRE

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Mabuia stangeri is a small skink, around 6 or 7 inches long, light brown in color, with lighter stripes.

Wandering around, I came across a bunch of small holes in the ground and some small birds nearby. I then remembered learning of an endemic bird on the island, the Raso lark (*Alauda razae*). They numbered only 20 pairs in the world, and it dawned on me that I was likely looking at the entire worldwide population of Raso larks. It made me feel very humble.

I also came across an owl nest that was littered with pellets. I was told *Macroscincus* bones had been found in such pellets, although they were thought to be very old bones. There were other reptilian remains in the pellets I opened, but no *Macroscincus*.

A little farther inland, I once again encountered some holes in the ground. From them, I could occasionally hear what sounded like children laughing. These were shearwater nests that contained baby birds. It has been suggested that *Macroscincus* might share shearwater nests, the way tuataras do in New Zealand. I laid on the ground to look into some of the nests and poked my hand down a couple, but still no sign of *Macroscincus*.

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For now, the only way to see *Macroscincus coctei* is by observing pickled specimens such as these.



The sun was getting hot and I had to get out of it, so I hobbled back to camp. On the way, on the cliff face near our camp, I found a low cave that was deep enough for me to squeeze into. From then on, I ended up laying in that cave every day, out of the sun, from noon until about 7 PM.

It was while laying in my cave I could have kicked myself for not bringing a book. All I had to read was a small Portuguese phrase book (Portuguese is the official language of Cape Verde), and an instruction book for my new camera. I became quite proficient at asking for stamps in Portuguese, and ask me anything about the Nikon 8000s.

Later that afternoon, Quetzal came back. He had walked around the entire island and seen much the same as me. No *Macroscincus*.

The Search Continues

The island is only about 5 square kilometers in size. The coastline is rocky with only one small beach in the northwest of the island. The west side, where we were camped, had a small shelf which ran along the coast and was covered at high tide. The other side of the island was more rocky with a cliff that dropped straight down into the sea. In the center of the island was a flat plateau. Vegetation was very sparse; we saw hardly anything green. We were told, however, that during the rainy season there was ample vegetation. *Macroscincus* is a vegetarian lizard, and we wondered if maybe it stays underground during the dry periods and comes out only when there is sufficient food.




RUBEN BANGUNE

The next few days followed the same pattern. The swelling on my face started to go down, and my skin was peeling off in sheets, but I was feeling better. Even my heel had stopped bleeding. I managed to do a whole trip around the island.

Our time on Raso was coming to an end. On the last day, water was running low and I was concerned the fishermen would be late coming to get us. During the last few hours I became obsessed with water, and I had never been so thirsty in my life. I sat there staring at the bottle and looking at my watch, as I allowed myself half an inch of the bottle every hour.

With half an inch left, the fishermen arrived. I was a happy man, but not half as happy as Quetzal, who had run out of cigarettes the day before.

We loaded our things and set off back to Sao Nicolau. Eventually, we made our way back to Praia to wait for our flight back to Senegal. I looked like the Elephant Man. My face was a mess and people were staring.

As for *Macrosclincus*: Does it still survive on Raso or Branco? I like to think that it does, though deep down in my heart I think it has gone forever. Several other expeditions have since been to the Cape Verde Islands, and although bones have been found, it seems unlikely that *Macrosclincus* still survives. It is a pity, as this animal was in captivity in Germany up until only 50 years ago, and we all know that with the advances in herpetoculture in the last 20 years, we could have saved it from extinction. 

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