

dragon ISLAND

by STEVE BUNK

In this monsoonal season, the dragon's island is dank and still, even in the shade of a rocky forest path. That's more comforting than the last time I was here, in a dry month, when fallen leaves rustled under the ferns, keeping us nervously on our toes as we searched the snake-ridden landscape for *Varamus komodoensis* — the world's largest lizard, a scalpel-toothed carnivore that occasionally kills humans.

Actually, this thirsty daub of clay, savannah and mountain called Komodo Island, located about 500km east of Bali in Indonesia's Lesser Sunda Islands, looks the part of a dragon's lair at any time of year. When we emerge from under the forest canopy's tangle of exposed roots, thorns and spiderwebs, the sun storms its light on everything, as if trying to blind the place. The indefinable whistles and coos of the jungle suddenly cease as we hear a crash in the bushes to one side of the path. There's a deep grunt, and ahead



of us a brownish shape streaks by. We rush forward to find a piglet twitching, its throat cut. In haste, the ora, as the Komodo villagers call the Komodo dragon, has dropped its quarry.

We crouch in the bushes, and within minutes the lizard glides silently into view. It's a young adult, only about 1.5m long — half the size of the largest specimens. Its brown body, flecked with green, is as thick as the trunk of a small palm and is covered entirely in scaly armour. The head, hooded in a loose skin that

looks uncannily like chain mail, is raised on a long neck, which enables it to see above the tall grass. Its eyes are rigid and merciless, while the forked tongue, its main sensory device, "tastes" the afternoon. We are as still as hunted prey, but the monster has smelled danger with its flicking tongue and it quickly returns to the undergrowth.

Already, Komodo dragons seem to have sensed they are no

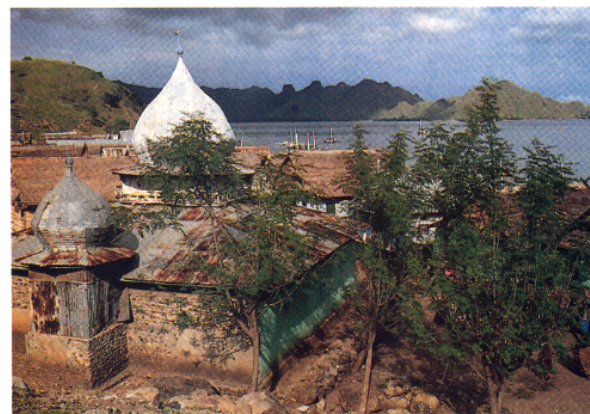
longer kings of the mountain. At the last official count in 1985, there were only about 5000 of them left. Roughly two-fifths of that number inhabit Komodo, now designated a national park. The others live in the nearby islands of Rintja, Padar and Flores. Their range is the smallest of the world's large carnivores — and the ones whose normal habitat is within the tourist zone on Komodo have almost been transformed into free-ranging zoo animals because of the easy meals they have become accustomed to. Until recently, tourists

could buy a goat and hire guides for the 2.6km stroll from the bare-bones guest facilities at Loho Liang to a dry riverbed, where perhaps 30 dragons of various sizes lay in wait for them.

I bought a goat there about four years ago. The guide discreetly slit the sacrificial animal's throat and tied it by a hind hoof from the branch of a tree growing near the embankment. The smell of blood

about and necks were outstretched, enabling them to swallow chunks whole. It was a shocking scene, terrible in its primal force, and yet, riveting. Within 90 minutes, virtually nothing was left of the goat, except for one hoof still tied to the rope.

Goat sacrifices for the tourists' benefit was a daily practice until the government instituted a new policy in December of 1989. Rightly, it was decided that the dragons had grown fat and lazy and had lost any need or



brought the dragons over to the carcass, whose head swayed just inches from the ground. What followed was a fearsome spectacle.

The largest of the monitors crawled over the backs of the others, paused for a moment in front of the goat, then lunged. It engulfed the goat's head and jerked backwards against the rope. The other lizards hovered nearby, not daring to openly challenge the leader's first rights. After several moments of tugging and grinding, the dragon finally severed the goat's head and swallowed it whole.

This signalled to the others their chance to feed and they closed in, hissing angry warnings at each other. Once the goat's stomach was ripped open, the beasts swarmed over each other in their growing frenzy to reach the carrion.

Their heads were spattered with partially digested grass, saliva flew

desire to hunt. Only one feeding, of a single goat, is now conducted by the guides, each Sunday.

That's really just a token for the tourists: a fully grown dragon can eat up to 80 per cent of its own unfed weight. The largest, which grow to lengths of 3m or more, can weigh in at up to 250kg.

The dragons often lie in wait along game trails, rushing out to hamstring unwary victims, then ripping head-first into the entrails even before the prey is dead. Both predators and scavengers, they devour any meat within hunting range, from rodents to water buffalo. They even consume their own kind, although mostly the very old or very young.

This cannibalism is a threat to the species' well-being, as are raids on dragon eggs by dogs, which are brought to Komodo by poachers seeking deer. The poachers often leave the dogs to run wild and com-

pete with the dragons for food. In the elevated wooden guest bungalows on Komodo, the most obvious night sounds I heard, aside from rats scrabbling in the walls and wild boar foraging under the house, were the dogs howling at the moon.

Another threat comes from wildfires, which destroy the lizards' camouflage as they hunt their prey. Again, such fires are often set by poachers trying to flush out deer or boar. Yet another problem is dynamite-fishing in the area, which destroys organisms at the bottom of the food chain and could eventually have a devastating effect on the island's entire ecosystem.

Added to all this, the Lesser Sunda Islands comprise by far the driest region in Indonesia, suffering frequent droughts. They also are in an active volcanic belt, and have in the recent past been covered in a deadly ash from eruptions. The threat of starvation is a very real factor in the dragons' struggle for survival.

None of the park rangers there is a scientist or scholar. To find one of the country's leading experts on the Komodo dragon, I visited Bali, where Putra Sastrawan heads the biology department at the University of Denpasar. In his halting English, Sastrawan advised: "Checking the population regularly, that's the thing to do... and the trend of the population could also be studied by the potential sources of food."

Sastrawan holds a Master's degree in agricultural science from the Queensland University of Technology and would like to do his PhD thesis on the monitor, but it might have to be a labour of love; rangers, for instance, are paid very poorly and often have only rice to eat.

And obviously, Komodo itself is a forbidding place. Motorised boats can be forced backwards by the powerful currents around the island, fishermen drown, the sea and land are rife with poisonous snakes. There are scorpions, spiders, sharks, and crocodiles even bigger than the lizards. Komodo's villagers call the dragons "land crocodiles".

Villagers in the dragons' more tourist-free habitats, such as on

Opposite page, village on Komodo Island; this page, clockwise from top right, Komodo dragons (oras) at a feeding site; Putra Sastrawan, head of biology, Denpasar University and Komodo dragon expert; villagers on Komodo carve the oras; hydrofoils shuttle luxury cruise passengers to Komodo Island to view the dragons; guest facilities at Loho Liang may not be five-star but they certainly offer adventure



Wildlife

Rintja and in western Flores, still experience one or two attacks annually by the beasts. Maiming is more often the case nowadays for humans than death from infected bites. A floating hospital now serves the region to provide antibiotics.

Only one tourist apparently has ever been harmed. That was an aged Swiss nature-lover who disappeared on the island in 1974, presumed eaten. Only his hat and a camera were found, hanging in a tree. A cross and inscription on a hillside commemorate the event, raising tragedy to the level of instant mythology.

The question now is whether the ora will survive the tourists. In 1989, more than 7000 people signed the guest book on Komodo — more than seven times the number of visitors four years earlier. After a couple of days on Komodo, I stared in disbelief as a luxury cruiser dropped anchor in deep water near the island and a hydrofoil ferried an international



Tourists behind fences — for their own safety — photograph some of the largest carnivores in the world

group of tourists to the beach. They then delightedly slipped and slid along a muddy trail to the feeding place, where a rickety sapling-and-wire fence has been erected along the riverbank to pen in the tourists and keep out the lizards.

Back in Bali, Sastrawan admitted, "It is true that the behaviour of the animal in that sort of area is changing due to the fact that the animals keep in contact too frequently with people. But I still remind people that think the animal has become tame, it is not tame. Once they are hungry and once they smell blood, they just

go crazy. They will attack everything that moves — even their friends."

This attitude has served the Komodo dragon well for centuries. If it can just keep on attacking, despite the killing kindness of tourism, perhaps it will continue to survive. →

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