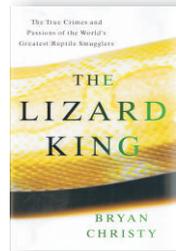


The Lizard King: The True Crimes and Passions of the World's Greatest Reptile Smugglers.

By Bryan Christy. 2008

Hardback: 260pp. \$24.99

Published by Twelve, New York. ISBN 978-0-446-58095-3



Reviewed by Mark O'Shea.

The Lizard King delves into one of the less savoury aspects of herpetoculture, the world of reptile smuggling, and it also looks at the hobby that funds this trade, our hobby, the hobby we all buy into and from, although the book primarily investigates from the American perspective. We are relatively small-fry in the UK, we have always known we are behind the Americans, Germans and Dutch when it came to which species we can keep, the way we kept them and the amount of money we can afford to lavish on them, but this small island has always been an island of shop-keepers and pet-keepers, so we cannot be counted out. Author Bryan Christy gets it about right when he summarises the addictive side of herps as *Bigger, Meaner, Rarer, Hot*, acknowledging at the same time that not all keepers become so addicted.

I met Christy at a conference entitled *Squamate Evolution and Systematics: A Conference in Honour of Garth Underwood*,¹ at the Linnean Society of London on 22-23 April 2004. A small group of us met in a London pub near the Linnean Society, and it turned out that Bryan was researching a book about Joe Slowinski and was talking to people who worked in the field, catching reptiles. As we now know it was Jamie James who ended up writing Joe's story (I reviewed *The Snake Charmer* in the last issue of *The Herptile*) while Bryan's research took him in a different direction, culminating in *The Lizard King* a piece of truly investigative research which involved interviewing the main participants and protagonists from both sides, whilst, like a good journalist, not taking sides, thereby allowing the reader to decide how he/she felt about Right and 'Wong' as the story unfurls.

The US publisher TWELVE, publishes no more than one book per month, which means twelve a year, so they are very discerning. *The Lizard King* was their book for August 2008. It is centred around the rise, and fall, and rise again, of one of the most notorious reptile smugglers of our time, Mike Van Nostrand, who in the 1980s set up Florida-based *Strictly Reptiles*, following his father Ray into the reptile business despite not particularly caring for reptiles like his snake-addicted father, and also Van Nostrand's nemesis, a determined and resourceful US Fish and Wildlife officer called 'Chip' Bepler, a man who wanted to protect wildlife from the Van Nostrands of the world.

¹ For those who do not know Garth Leon Underwood (1919 - 2002), was one of the World's most respected snake taxonomists and evolutionary biologists. He was based at the British Museum (Natural History) from 1964 and even after his official retirement from the City of London polytechnic he was still a regular visitor and researcher at the BMNH.

But it is not just the story of the battle between these two strong-willed characters, each refusing to be beaten by the other. There are other intrigues going on in other parts of the world, authorities from California to Holland to Indonesia to Australia, trying to dismantle the international trade in smuggled CITES species. The story of the sting that trapped Malaysian smuggling king-pin Anson Wong is worthy of a book on its own, and completely removed from the downfall of Van Nostrand, despite the fact that they did business together. As is the much earlier tale of how Hank Molt supplied, and then almost destroyed the reputations of, many of America's most famous zoos, dragging the names of some of American herpetology's Greats and Goods down into the dirt with him. Tom Crutchfield is in there too. It was largely his jailing over some Fijian iguanas from Wong that created the vacuum filled by Van Nostrand. And then there are stories of men who took a risk that paid off, men like Bob Clark and Mark Bell, who were in the right place at the right time with the right idea (mass designer python breeding), and were prepared to gamble everything they and their families had to make it happen – legally! Without these pioneering captive breeders and their like, it is doubtful herp keeping would be where it is today, and there would still be massive reliance on Burmese and ball pythons taken from the wild, shipped by the Wongs to be sold by the Van Nostrands.

Reptile and drugs have often been linked, and in *The Lizard King* that link becomes patently obvious. There are drug dealers who also deal in reptiles, or have a penchant for owning rare reptiles, and reptile dealers who use and also deal in drugs. It is hardly surprising that after drugs, wildlife is the next biggest illicit trans-continental industry, ahead of guns even, yet the resources made available to fight this international battle to save endangered species are woefully inadequate compared to those available to combat cocaine or marijuana trafficking. And the worst story in this vein in the book is the cocaine constrictors story, it is hard to imagine and must have been harder to witness, no wonder Bepler was a man on a mission.

There are some mildly amusing stories too, such as when Raymond Van Nostrand lost a cobra in his car. I could associate with that having done exactly the same thing once, but unlike Van Nostrand I found my errant serpent. *The Lizard King* is a wake-up call to anyone who keeps reptiles and by that I do not just mean private collectors, I mean zoos, museums, exhibitions, everyone who keeps reptiles.

Who is to blame for this world-wide trade in endangered species? The itinerant farmer supplementing his meagre earnings and supporting his family by bagging a green tree python in West Papua, the wholesale Indonesian exporter, the wholesale US importer, the local pet shop owner who retails the snake, or the person who walks in, buys it and takes it home?

As reptile keepers have you ever considered yourself part of the problem?

As reptile lovers have you ever considered you might be helping to nail down the coffin lid on a rare species of snake/lizard/turtle/frog, by buying it? Do zoos, who profess to be concerned about conservation and driven by a desire to save species from extinction, really know where some of their specimens have come from, and how genuine is their paperwork? Certainly some major US zoos did not know (or did not ask).

Every reptile keeper has been faced by the dilemma, the chance to pick up a species he/she has long coveted at a price that is just affordable.

How does the mantra go: "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true", well that line could easily continue with "or it is illegal".

Those recently described Papuan varanids, tree monitors, Timor pythons, Madagascan plowshare tortoises or Indian starred tortoises. Are they really captive-bred? Is the paperwork genuine? If it looks genuine, does it originate from a country flagged up by CITES as having a history of corrupt officials prepared to sign anything for a price? It is really true that there are people out there who can get you anything you want, for a price, and in *The Lizard King* you will be amazed to learn that 'anything you want' even includes tuataras straight off their remote New Zealand islands.

Apparently CB is not always shorthand for 'captive bred' sometimes it is "shorthand for 'smuggled with paperwork'." Christy provides an excellent example with the Indian starred tortoise, *Geochelone elegans*. They are found in India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, all of which protect them and ban them from trade. But captive bred specimens come out of UAE by the dozens, hundreds even, with captive bred paperwork to support their now legal trade to anywhere in the world. A question for you: How many institutions breed Indian starred tortoises in UAE? This answer is: Zero. Christy shows how CITES inadvertently protects, even aids the very people it was set up to stop, and fails the animals it was designed to protect. All it takes is a corrupt official with an impressive letterhead.

As you read *The Lizard King* you may find yourself looking at yourself and wondering if you are partly to blame for providing the market that smugglers seek to supply, as Van Nostrand commented, where do you think all the original bearded dragons and frilled lizards came from, since Australian banned their export decades ago. Yes they are many generations captive-bred and legal now, but what about their great-great-great-great grandparents? How did they get the breeders in the first place? Yet we turn a blind-eye and continue to keep, breed and trade in both these species.

Some of the people we meet at the start of *The Lizard King*, the 'mules' such as the Argentina tortoise courier Tomas Medina, are clearly just in it for the money, although fortunately for him, unlike drug-smuggling mules, he was not expected to actually swallow his illegal cargo. But what of the big boys, the main players, the major reptile importers and exporters, wholesalers and store owners, I am sure some profess a love of reptiles, some may even start out loving reptiles, having caught or kept cornsnakes as youngsters, but when the filthy lucre becomes the attraction these people become capable of almost anything and seem to lose their genuine appreciation of reptiles as fascinating creatures, seeing them more as a means to buy a larger house and boat. This does not include all reptile dealers of course, there are many who make their livings legally, so it is important not to tar everyone with the same brush, but it must be tempting to accept that once in a lifetime money-making offer of a rare species, no questions asked.

The Lizard King is not a novel, it is a true account of the sordid business of reptile smuggling and the people trying to combat that trade, but one cannot help feeling it would make a great movie, somewhere between *Miami Vice*, although the law enforcement officer would have to lose the gator, and *Lethal Weapon*, doors do get kicked in and guns are drawn. It is interesting to conjure who would play Chip Bepler and Mike Van Nostrand, although Jack Palance might make a passable Raymond Van Nostrand in his later years, world-worn and jail-savvy. The problem is that anyone of us who keeps reptiles might have a walk-on part in the story and considering how popular reptile keeping has become, that is worrying.

I will lift my final comment directly from the dust-jacket. It says simply: "Imagine *The Sopranos*...with snakes!"