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Marine iguanas between land and sea



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This document, dedicated to the marine iguanas of the Galapagos Islands, combines a series of photographs by the British researcher Godfrey Merlen, preserved as slides in the audiovisual collection of the Library, Archive & Museum of the Charles Darwin Foundation, with a selection of texts about the archipelago that are part of the "Historical Bibliography" of the *Galapagueana* digital project.

Using both resources, and connecting the visual works with fragments of narratives and chronicles, a comprehensive approach to one of the most iconic Galapagos species is sought. An approach that goes beyond mere scientific knowledge and that places this species in a broad and comprehensive framework. The minimalist design reinforces the importance of the images, which are already part of the audiovisual heritage of the Galapagos.

The texts included in these pages are quoted in their original version and language. At the end of the book, whenever necessary, a possible translation of them is offered.

Our thanks to Godfrey Merlen for the images, and to all the chroniclers, travelers and scholars who left, in their field notebooks, testimony of the natural wonders they found on their way through "The Encantadas".

Edgardo Civalero | Charles Darwin Foundation



"...e porque el navio no abia mas agua que para dos días, acordaron de echar la barca e salir en tierra por agua e yerba para los caballos, e salidos no hallaron sino lobos marinos, e tortugas e galápagos tan grandes, que llevaba cada uno un ombre encima, e muchas higuanas que son como sierpes."

Tomás de Berlanga. *Carta a Su Majestad de Fray Tomás de Berlanga, describiendo su viaje desde Panamá á Puerto Viejo, e los trabajos que padeció en la navegacion*. Portoviejo, 1535.



"...the penguin and seals also, some of which latter I understood were of that tribe which are considered to be of the fur kind, were seen, as likewise some guanans and snakes; these, together with a few birds, of which in point of number the dove bore the greatest proportion, were what appeared principally to compose the inhabitants of this island."

George Vancouver. *Voyage of discovery to the North Pacific Ocean, and round the world in the years 1791-9*. Volume 3, book 6. London: [n.d.], 1798.



"The guanas are small, and of a sooty black, which, if possible, heightens their native ugliness. Indeed, so disgusting is their appearance, that no one on board could be prevailed on, to take them as food ... The sea guana is a non descript; it is less than the land guana and much uglier, they go to the sea in herds, a fishing, and sun themselves, on the rocks, like seals, and may be called alligators, in miniature."

James Colnett. *A Voyage for Whaling and Discovery round C. Horn into the Pacific Oceans...* [N.d.]: [n.d.], 1795.



"The sea guana resembles the land guana in its shape, being about the same size; but its back and head go up to a sharp ridge on the top, and a comb runs from near the nose over the top of its head to near the end of its tail, on the top of this ridge, which gives it the most disagreeable appearance of any animal to be found here. The colour of the skin is nearly black and has a rough and coarse appearance as the land kind. It obtains its living entirely out of the sea. The other kind feeds upon the same vegetable substance as the terrapin."

Amasa Delano. *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, Comprising Three Voyages Round the World...* Boston: printed by E. G. House, 1817.



"...where we went on shore, and, to our great surprize, and no little alarm, on entering the bushes, found myriads of guanas, of an enormous size and the most hideous appearance imaginable; the rocks forming the cove were also covered with them, and, from their taking to the water very readily, we were induced to believe them a distinct species from those found among the keys of the West Indies. In some spots a half acre of ground would be so completely covered with them, as to appear as though it was impossible for another to get in the space; they would all keep their eyes fixed constantly on us, and we at first supposed them prepared to attack us. We soon however discovered them to be the most timid of animals, and in a few moments knocked down hundreds of them with our clubs, some of which we brought on board, and found to be excellent eating, and many preferred them greatly to the turtle."

David Porter. *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean by Captain David Porter in the United States Frigate Essex in the Years 1812, 1813, And 1814.* Philadelphia: published by Bradford and Inskeep, 1815



"Guanas we found here in great abundance, and notwithstanding their disgusting appearance, they were eaten by many of the sailors, who esteemed them as most delicious food."

J. Shillibeer. *A narrative of the Briton's voyage, to Pitcairn's Island*. Taunton: printed for the author by J. W. Marriott, 1817.



"There is a smaller aquatic species [of Iguana in James], belonging to the genus *Monitor*, with a flat perpendicular tail, but it is much rarer than the other."

John Scouler. Account of a voyage to Madeira, Brazil, Juan Fernandez, and the Gallapagos Islands... *The Edinburgh Journal of Science*, 5 (11), October 1826, pp. 195-236.



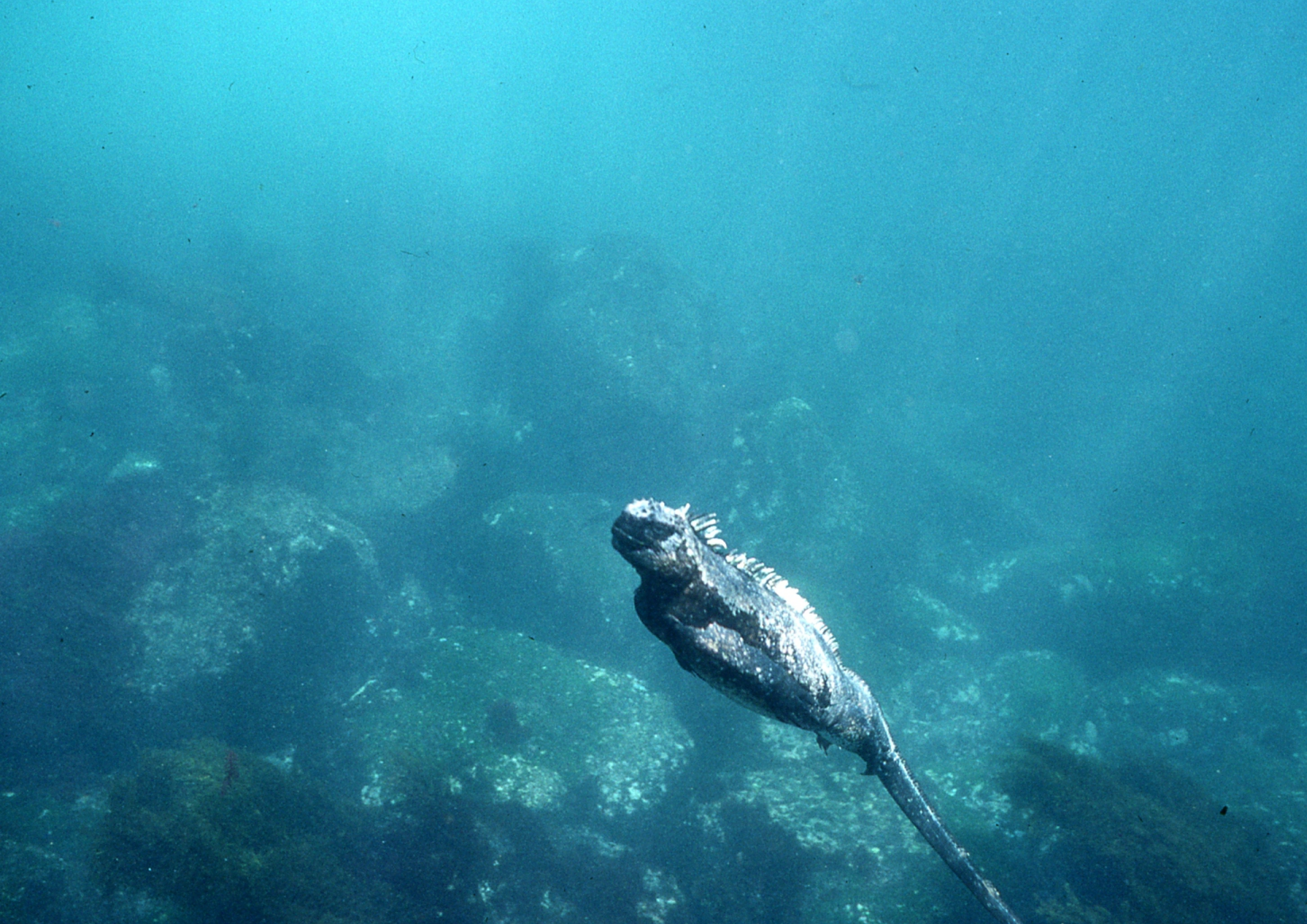
"Our party to Narborough Island landed among an innumerable host of sea-guanas, the ugliest living creatures we ever beheld. They are like the alligator, but with a more hideous head, and of a dirty sooty black colour, and sat on the black lava rocks like so many imps of darkness."

Lord Byron. *Voyage of H. M. S. Blonde to the Sandwich Islands in the Years 1824-1825*. London: John Murray, 1826.



"The *Amblyrhynchus*, a remarkable genus of lizards, is confined to this archipelago: there are two species, resembling each other in general form, one being terrestrial and the other aquatic ... When in the water this lizard swims with perfect ease and quickness, by a serpentine movement of its body and flattened tail — the legs being motionless and closely collapsed on its sides. A seaman on board sank one, with a heavy weight attached to it, thinking thus to kill it directly; but when, an hour afterwards, he drew up the line, it was quite active ... a group of six or seven of these hideous reptiles may oftentimes be seen on the black rocks, a few feet above the surf, basking in the sun with outstretched legs."

Charles Darwin. *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the countries visited during the voyage of H.M.S. Beagle round the world, under the Command of Capt. Fitz Roy*. London: John Murray, 1860.



"Avant l'arrivée des colons, les îles Galapagos ne possédaient qu'un très-petit nombre d'animaux; parmi les quadrupèdes, on ne comptait que les tortues de terre, qui parvenaient à une grosseur prodigieuse; les lézards rouges et gris et une autre espèce qui paraît amphibie: cette dernière espèce est beaucoup plus grosse que les deux premières, elle est noire sur le dos, jaune sous le ventre, et depuis la tête jusqu'à la queue elle est armée, sur le dos, d'une rangée d'épines en forme de scie: cette variété est hideuse à voir et ne se trouve pas sur le continent; elle ressemble cependant, mais de loin, aux iguanas de la rivière de Guayaquil."

Abel du Petit-Thouars. Voyage autour du monde sur la frégate La Vénus pendant les années 1836-1839 publié par ordre du Roi, sous les auspices du Ministre de la Marine. Tome II. Paris: Gide, éditeur, 1841.



"We found two sorts of iguanas, the marine species and the land; the former are most repulsive-looking reptiles; they feed almost entirely on sea-weed, and are always to be found basking on the rocks near the water; their colour so closely resembles that of the black scoriae that it is very difficult to distinguish them."

W. R. Kennedy. *Sporting Adventures in the Pacific: Whilst in Command of the "Reindeer"*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1876.



"Lizards also, were exceedingly scarce, a few only were seen, and not more than two, I think, were captured. These reptiles belong to a remarkable genus met with nowhere else in the world, being entirely confined to the Galapagos Islands. I was fortunate enough to secure one of the marine kind, the *Amblyrhynchus cristatus*, which measured 31 inches in length."

A. H. Markham. A Visit to the Galapagos Islands in 1880. *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, 2 (12), December 1880, pp. 742-755.

Amblyrhynchus cristatus

(1) Head small, strongly convex, almost as wide as long, covered on top with large, subacute, prominent tubercles; (2) swollen lips; (3) nostril oval, pierced into a small swollen shield, closer to end of snout than to sockets; (4) small eye and eardrum; (5) dorsal surface of head covered with large convex or conical, spiny, rough, polygonal scutes; (6) rostral and mental very small; (7) 10-12 upper and lower labials; (8) throat strongly folded, covered with minute granular scales; (9) dorsal and nuchal ridges of lanceolate spines, highest on nape, sometimes uninterrupted between shoulders; (10) body scales very small, keeled behind, smooth on belly; (11) strong limbs; (12) rather short digits, third toe strongly denticulated within basal joint; (13) Series of 20-30 femoral pores on each side, often a second parallel series of few pores; (14) tail about one and a half times longer than head and body, strongly compressed and flattened at end, crested above, covered with crossed series of keeled scales.

Bioweb. 2022.

Translations

"...and because the ship had no more water than for two days, they agreed to launch the boat and go out on land for water and grass for the horses, and when they arrived they found nothing but sea lions, and turtles and tortoises so large that each one could carry a man on top, and many iguanas that are like serpents."

Tomás de Berlanga, p. 3.

"Before the arrival of the colonists, the Galapagos Islands possessed only a very small number of animals; among the quadrupeds, there were only tortoises, which reached a prodigious size; the red and gray lizards and another species which seems amphibious: this last species is much larger than the first two, it is black on the back, yellow under the belly, and from the head to the tail it is armed, on the back, with a row of thorns in the shape of a saw: this variety is hideous to behold and is not found on the mainland; it resembles, however, from a distance, the iguanas of the river of Guayaquil."

Abel du Petit-Thouars, p. 21.



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