

SPECIES ON THE BRINK

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The Komodo dragon's reputation as a terrifying, ruthless predator does nothing to help its cause

Why the 'dragon' moniker?

Komodo dragons are monitor lizards, but the name fittingly reflects their historical reputation. Early explorers returned from Komodo with stories of great, scaly monsters with fiery breath, and people at the time used to write 'here be dragons' on their maps. They are the world's largest living lizards, reaching a length of up to 3.1m and a maximum weight of 166kg.

Where do they live?

They're found on just six of Indonesia's 17,000+ islands, roughly 500km east of Bali. Komodo and nearby Rinca are home to more than two-thirds of the surviving population, but they also live on neighbouring Padar (they disappeared from this tiny island in the late 1970s, but a small number have been reintroduced) and the islets of Gili Motang and Gili Dasami. These are all in Komodo National Park. There is also a small population along the north and west coasts of Flores, outside the park. Altogether, they occupy a total area of 809 km² of savanna, monsoon forest and coastal mangroves – a realm that has reduced in size by about 12% over a three-generation (45-year) period.

How many are left?

The total population, including juveniles but not arboreal hatchlings, is approximately 3,500 individuals. But there are believed to be fewer than 1,400 mature Komodo dragons in the wild – and only 330 of them are breeding females. Worse still, they are split into eight subpopulations, with little genetic mixing. Even so, numbers are stable or increasing everywhere except Flores, where they seem to be declining.

What are the main threats?

They are quite well protected in Komodo National Park, where there is no threat from habitat loss and little risk from illegal



Rising sea levels could threaten these extra-large lizards

harvesting or the impacts of invasive cats and goats. There is some poaching of deer, their main prey, but this doesn't seem to have much consequence. A study of local ecotourism over the past 50 years shows that even the significant influx of humans has little effect on Komodo dragon numbers. Those living on Flores, however, are threatened by habitat loss and the loss of natural prey to human hunters; there also appears to be an illicit trade in live animals for zoos and the international pet trade. But the biggest fear throughout their range is global warming, with likely changes in temperature, precipitation and sea levels predicted to reduce suitable habitat by up to 71% in the next 15 years. For this reason, in 2021, IUCN reclassified the Komodo dragon from Vulnerable to Endangered on its Red List.

Do they deserve their reputation as fearsome creatures?

They're certainly regarded as the world's most dangerous lizards. Komodo dragons have killed at least five people (including two foreign tourists) since records began in 1974, with 31 reported bites and attacks. Perhaps surprisingly, they are the largest venomous

animals on the planet. They have glands in their mouths that produce venom as potent as that found in some of the world's most dangerous snakes. It works in two ways: first, by causing a sudden and severe drop in blood pressure that sends their prey into shock; and second, by preventing the blood from clotting to ensure the hapless animal bleeds to death. The dragons distribute the venom by raking their serrated, shark-like teeth through their prey's flesh. By no stretch of the imagination is it a pleasant way to die. Carrion is their main food, but they frequently wait along trails to ambush larger animals such as deer and pigs, striking unexpectedly and fiercely.

Does this make them harder to protect?

Inevitably. However, they don't really deserve their dreadful reputation any more than other large predators. Perhaps it's their lack of aesthetic appeal, in many people's eyes? For example, they are always drooling and, for a long time, it was believed that their saliva contained a witch's brew of toxic bacteria, which was so virulent their bite wounds never healed. But we now know that they spend ages cleaning their teeth using their tongues and leaves, so they don't have chunks of stinky, rotting flesh lingering in their mouths and cultivating bacteria. The more you learn about Komodo dragons, the more likeable they become. **W**

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