



## Reptiles – our scaly friends

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The persecution of Maltese reptiles and amphibians due to superstition and to the lack of available scientific knowledge has led reptiles to have a bad reputation, confusing many of us as to whether these creatures are friends or foes.

Instead of appreciating these beneficial creatures' ability to help in various ways, our society's mind has been filled with myths and misinformation that make us fear these extraordinary animals.

A typical example is the rumour that geckos carry skin diseases because when moulting they shed their skin in a way that looks "unhealthy".

Scientific studies show that among vertebrates, reptiles are the least likely to carry external pathogens due to their tightly packed scaly skin, and any parasites found on their skin cannot be transferred to humans.

Anyone who dares to take a closer look at herpetology (the study of these organisms) will remain impressed enough to accept the fact that we must co-exist together. Reptiles and amphibians have been recorded to exist in the Maltese islands for the last 100,000 years and some species have been recorded only in Malta or Malta and Sicily (*Maltascula endemism*).

Many of these are nowadays extinct or do not exist anymore on our islands, an example is *Bufo viridis* (Green toad) and *Lacerta Siculamelitensis* (Extinct giant lizard). Still nine species of terrestrial and five species of marine reptiles (two only recorded once) exist today while only two species of amphibians are found (only one is indigenous and the other has been recently recorded from only a few localities in Gozo since it is restricted to a particular environment and probably introduced in the early 90s).

Out of the nine terrestrial species of reptiles five are indigenous, one is endemic with five subspecies till now (one of them present on *Lampione* and *Linosa* island), two were most probably introduced by merchant ships during the First World War and the presence of one is definitely a result of intro-

duction in the 1850s.

Numerous studies are being carried out to assess distribution, taxonomy and the effect (since some are aliens) of some of these species. Findings show that all are in one way or another beneficial to us, even in some industries like agriculture.

Although marine reptiles do not help in agriculture, they also help us by eliminating large amounts of floating jellyfish, which enter our beaches in summer. All these creatures in some way are predatory to pests and vermins which ruin home appliances and even bother us while we are at rest.

The Maltese *herpetofauna* has been protected by law since 1992, but still populations of these animals are decreasing and getting closer to the verge of extinction. Are we giving enough education in schools and to the general public to understand that this planet does not belong to us but we share it with other extraordinary organisms?

### Setting up a reptile and amphibian section in Nature Trust

Nature Trust council and the undersigned together with a developing group of amateur herpetologists will soon be setting a meeting to discuss how to establish a section in NT on herpetology. Its aims will be twofold: education (to increase awareness on these animals); and conservation via research and habitat protection.

### Call for volunteers

This section requires volunteers to help in research and surveys. Anyone interested to join please contact Arnold Sciberras by email on [bioislets@hotmail.com](mailto:bioislets@hotmail.com) or [ntsec@waldonet.net.mt](mailto:ntsec@waldonet.net.mt) or by mobile on 99887950.

If you are interested in animals, Nature Trust will be holding a half day seminar on wildlife as follows: Saturday 29 October – Half Day seminar dedicated to animal awareness:

Celebrating wildlife – condemning cruelty".

Venue: Nature Trust, Wied Ghollieqa Education Centre (Car park 1 University of Malta). Booking open till Monday by emailing [ntsec@waldonet.net.mt](mailto:ntsec@waldonet.net.mt) or phoning 7947 2950. Members: Lm1. non-members: Lm2.