

ARTICLES

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First Record of *Varanus bitatawa* in the Philippine Pet Trade

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Abstract - Described in 2010, *Varanus bitatawa* is recorded for the first time in the Philippine pet trade. An asking price of ₱ 100,000 PHP (\$2,380 USD) suggests that the seller was aware of its highly-coveted status in the pet trade.

Closely grouped together with *Varanus olivaceus* and *V. mabitang*, *V. bitatawa* is the most recently described frugivorous monitor lizard from the Philippines (Welton *et al.*, 2010). In northeastern Luzon, *V. bitatawa* is an important source of protein and traded bush meat for the indigenous Agta and Ilongot tribes (Welton *et al.*, 2010, 2012). While the IUCN lists *V. olivaceus* as vulnerable and *V. mabitang* as endangered, *V. bitatawa* has yet to be assessed (IUCN, 2012). All Philippine monitor lizards are accorded legal protection under the Wildlife Act of the Philippines.

Dealers formerly displayed illicit wildlife openly in major pet centers of Metro Manila and in some major cities. Over the last five years, many wildlife dealers and hobbyists have increasingly utilized local trading and social networking websites to trade in exotic and indigenous wildlife. On 5 May 2012, a wildlife dealer located in the Philippines posted a photograph of a *V. bitatawa* being offered for sale on a popular social networking website (Fig. 1). The adult specimen was reported to weigh 15 kg and measure 1.7 m in total length, and was priced at ₱ 100,000 PHP (\$2,380 USD).

Of the three known frugivorous monitor lizards, only *V. olivaceus* is regularly observed in the Philippine pet trade, where the asking price for hatchling-sized to juvenile animals (< 3 kg) ranges from ₱ 1,500 to 3,500 PHP (\$36 - \$83 USD) (pers. obs.). The relatively high asking price for *V. bitatawa* described here suggests that the seller was well aware of wildlife collectors' willingness to pay a high price for a newly-described species.

References

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Fig. 1. Screen capture of the *Varanus bitatawa* being offered for sale.