

Page from a Zoological Society of London press scrapbook showing the London Illustrated News front-cover story of Miss Joan Proctor operating on Sumbawa in June 1927 - see page 18

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF LONDON ZOO'S FIRST KOMODO DRAGONS

Nick Thompson

"About 200 men from Flores searched the valley and when someone saw a 'dragon' it was surrounded and snared by means of a noose attached to a stick. A few animals tried to attack but, cornered by such a great number of people, they normally hid under branches or a tree, and subsequently they were snared."

An Indonesian hunting party of some 200 natives was organised in 1927 and set out to capture 12 specimens of the feared Komodo Dragon, but before this story can be told we need to learn more about where such an event took place and the reason for them undertaking such a hazardous quest.

The Background

What we now know as Indonesia was once a huge colony comprising more than seventeen thousand islands, large and small, which were ruled over by the Dutch, much in the manner of British rule within the sub-continent of India, and known to us at that time as the Dutch East Indies. We are interested in a remote group of islands found to the south of Borneo and Sulawesi, and east of Java. Four of them, Flores, Rintja, Sumba, and Sumbawa, are unfamiliar names, but one, 'Komodo', is now famous as the home of a lizard as large as a crocodile, yet unknown to the world until 1912.

It was Major Pieter Antonie Ouwens, the Director of the Zoological Museum and Botanical Gardens in Buitenzorg (now Bogor) in Java who first realised this was a new species of monitor lizard, thus finding himself in the happy position of being able to write the first scientific description of the Komodo Dragon in 1912, for which he suggested the name *Varanus komodoensis*. The story of how this came about has been told by several authors, but his account in the regular 'Bulletin of the Jardin Botanique of Buitenzorg', No.6 of that year, is of course the definitive version:

ON A LARGE VARANUS SPECIES FROM THE ISLAND OF KOMODO by P.A.OUWENS

Through the kind introduction by Captain W. L. Einthoven, in December 1910, I entered into correspondence with Mr. J. K. H. Van Steyn Van Hensbroek, 1st Lieutenant of Infantry, who served as Civil Administrator at Reo (Island of Flores).

The latter mentioned that he had received information from the inhabitants of that island, that in the neighbourhood of Laboean Badjo, and on the island of Komodo occurred a *Varanus* species of an unusual size. They called the animal "Boeaja darat" land crocodile. His curiosity having been aroused by these reports, he resolved to collect some particulars concerning these animals and to obtain a specimen if possible, as soon as he should be on duty on the island of Komodo.

On his arrival in the island he was provided with the necessary data by Mr. Kock and Mr. Aldegon a.o., members of the pearl fleet, stationed at Komodo, and both of them keen hunters. They informed Mr. Van Steyn Van Hensbroek, that these animals may even attain a length of 6 to 7 metres. In the beginning of his

sojourn in Komodo, Mr Aldegon shot a few specimens of that size. Since the island has been more frequented, the animals have withdrawn to the mountains. They live, so he says, exclusively on land, where they make great holes under the stones and rocks, in which they always remain at night. Their feet are fairly long, and in spite of their awkward build, they can move with great rapidity.

In walking, they do not touch the ground, neither with the chest nor with the belly. They walk on the balls of the feet, as may clearly be seen by the callosities on them, as well as by their footprints. The neck is rather long and extraordinarily mobile. The animal can move its head in every direction, and so it can see everything: this is of great use to the creature, as it seems to be remarkably deaf. Mr. Aldegon says, that, if only care is taken, that the animal does not see the hunter, the latter may make as much noise as he please, without the animal being aware of his presence. Its deafness is confirmed by the circumstance, that it only goes out in the daytime and never at night. They live either singly or in troops. Their food is exclusively of animal nature.

If Mr. Aldegon shot wild pigs or birds and left them on the ground, they were eaten by the *Boeaja darat*, which sometimes fought desperately for the prey.

The above mentioned notes are according to Mr. Van Steyn Van Hensbroek.

During the time of his stay in Komodo he was fortunate enough to obtain a specimen 2.20m long, of which he sent me a photograph and the skin.

He further informed me that he would try to catch a living animal of larger size, but that this would not be so easy, as the inhabitants will not run the risk, for the animals not only bite, but keep the natives at a respectful distance by powerful blows with their tails.

As it was now established, that in Komodo exists a species of *Varanus* of exceptional dimensions, a native collector of the Zoological Museum here, was sent to Mr. Van Steyn Van Hensbroek in order to try to obtain further specimens with his assistance. As Mr. Van Steyn Van Hensbroek was soon transferred to Timor, the collector with the Redja Bitjara (native chief) and the necessary natives and dogs started out alone, with the result that he brought home one animal of 2.90m, one of 2.35m and two very young ones of about 1m. The two young specimens are still alive.

Finally, according to Mr. Van Steyn Van Hensbroek, another specimen of about 4m was shot at Komodo by Sergeant Beker.

The collector quite confirms the observations of Mr. Aldegon, regarding deafness and other peculiarities.

Experiments made here with the young animals lead to the same conclusion.

DESCRIPTION.

Teeth acute, compressed. Snout short, depressed at the tip. Nostril oval, three times as far from the orbit as from the tip of the snout. Digits strong. Tail compressed, keeled above. The caudal keel with a low five-six toothed crest. Head- and neck-scales large and very strongly keeled. Abdominal scales keeled, in 97 transversed rows. Scales on upper surface smaller than the neck scales and strongly keeled. Dark brown above. Tongue very long and yellow. Tympanum large.

If the animal is indeed a species not yet described, I propose to call it: *Varanus Komodoensis*.

(The article was accompanied by two photos showing one dead and one living specimen)

The discovery and formal description of such a large, yet hitherto unknown creature, caused something of a sensation amongst the scientific community and beyond in those last two or three years before the Great War. The result was like a 'gold rush', with professional zoologists, and, sadly, big-game hunters, flocking to the island, intent on 'bagging' good specimens for their museums or collections. Indeed, by the time collecting Dragons became possible again after the War, both tribal and Dutch rulers had realised the necessity of declaring it illegal to hunt the species for sport, and limited the number that could be collected for scientific study or for zoos. One or two collecting expeditions seem to have been permitted after the War, when these regulations were simply waived with relative ease, notably one in 1924, where a Dutch Government official, O. Horst, was sent to the islands on a collecting and fact-finding mission. In his travels he came across a tame specimen chained to a tree on the island of Sumbawa, although it would be two years before he gained permission from the Assistant-Resident of Bima, W. Groeneveldt, to ship it to the Amsterdam Zoological Garden as a gift from himself. It arrived at the zoo on 14th October, 1926, but, in spite of a specially built 'steam-heated' cabin on the *SS Karimata*, managed to survive for only seven weeks until the 4th of December.*

*However, I should add that one author believes this specimen was in fact one of the dragons trapped by Douglas Burden, who led the American Expedition of 1926.

The Famous, but Controversial, American Expedition

W. Douglas Burden, a descendent of the wealthy Vanderbilt dynasty, was already famous as an explorer and hunter, when he sat down in 1926 for a discussion with Henry Fairfield Osborne, the President of the American Museum of Natural History; the same year in fact that he was made a Trustee of the museum, no doubt in recognition of the many exotic creatures that he had been instrumental in providing for the museum's public displays. He outlined a plan for an expedition to Komodo, chiefly to collect and bring back living and dead Dragons, and needed to know if the museum authorities would endorse the project if he were to contribute \$15,000 of his own money towards the enterprise, thus making it an 'official' collecting trip on their behalf. It was agreed.

Having discovered that maritime navigation in the region was extremely hazardous ,he also sought the advice, and possible help, of the Dutch Government through the interventions of Richard Tobin, the American Minister to The Hague, and Joseph Grew, Under-Secretary of State. Result! The Dutch Government would place an official 400-ton small steam yacht at their disposal, (the *SS Dog*), plus its experienced crew, for the duration of their two-month stay in the vicinity.

Burden was to be accompanied by his wife, Catherine, who would take still photographs, and the well-known herpetologist, Emmett Reid Dunn, who taught at Smith College for women, and later at Harvard, becoming President of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists in 1930.

With the expedition approved, the first destination the Burdens had planned was a visit to Peking, 120 miles inland from the coast. Travelling inland proved to be an unnecessarily reckless adventure, in view of the civil war that had erupted between the Republic of China and the Communists raging around them and the resultant threats they encountered on the way, but somehow they made it to Peking, a city under siege. Paradoxically, they stayed there in relative luxury for two weeks, before enduring further perils as they escaped to the coast, where their boat was ready to sail on to Singapore. It was here that they met up with Burden's former associate, F. J. Defossé, a celebrated hunter in these parts, and Lee Fai, a Chinese cameraman employed by Pathé, and an old friend of Burden, who was recruited to make a film of the expedition. These four travelled on to Batavia on the island of Flores, near to Komodo, where they met up with their herpetologist, Dunn, who had travelled there separately. Having

arrived a fortnight earlier, Dunn informed the party that Dutch regulations prevented any boat from taking them to Komodo, and that, in any case, the island having been made a preserve, hunting and collecting of its 'dragons' were prohibited... Whom could he ask for help? As luck would have it, he discovered that the newly-appointed Governor General of the whole of the Dutch East Indies, Andries Cornelis Dirk de Graeff, happened to be a mere 100 miles away at Tjipanas, enjoying his honeymoon! Honeymoon or not, he telegraphed the Governor-General, asking for an audience. After a few days this was granted and, dispensing with any further protocols, simply hired a car in which he and Catherine drove from Batavia to Tjipanas to meet the man himself.

I think wealth can often confer upon a man a certain air of self-confidence, natural authority, and expectation of the respect and co-operation of others, plus the trip being conducted in the Museum of New York's name gave it some official status, as it was reported that within five minutes of their meeting de Graeff had said to him, "So, how many of these lizards do you want?" Seizing the opportunity, Burden asked if he could take fifteen! He also promised to give the go-ahead for the crew of the S.S. *Dog*, presently on stand-by, to rendezvous with Burden and his group at Batavia, as previously agreed, placing themselves at his disposal for the duration of his trip. Finally Burden was provided with letters of introduction to all the Residents in control of the Sunda Islands, Banda and Celebes. Little did the Governor-General know what trouble he was igniting by such generous acts...

The group visited eight islands, including Java and Bali, collecting 249 lizards of nearly 30 species, together with other animals, but the main focus was on the island of Komodo, as soon as he had negotiated the recruitment of 15 natives with a tribal leader en route, whilst they were docked at Bima in Sumbawa. Four or five weeks were spent on and around Komodo, catching and releasing several more dragons than their agreed quota, but finally the Burdens were ready to depart for home, triumphant with 12 dead dragons for the Museum and two live specimens for the Zoo.

Dr. Dunn was keen to continue collecting reptiles and frogs for a few more days on the island of Lombok close by, where he was set down, whilst the others sailed on to Singapore, where Defossé and the cine-photographer, Lee Fai, were bade farewell. The dragons and other specimens were then despatched separately to New York, whilst the Burdens prepared for a more leisurely journey home, during which Douglas had time to pen his account of their adventures in a captivating book entitled, '*Dragon Lizards of Komodo*', which was to become a best-seller around the world, whilst Lee Fai's '*Pathé News*' film of their exploits reached international audiences within weeks. They were famous! The dragons that arrived at Bronx Park Zoo on the 11th of September were put on show immediately, and some 38,000 visitors turned up to see them the very next day! One survived for only a month, the other for two; never to be re-united with the Burdens, who did not arrive home until November 15th.

Burden included this rhyme about the Dragons, composed by a friend, in his book:-

*But the lizards, I'm sorry to say
Became gaunt and just faded away
For they only could thrive
Eating chickens alive
Which was banned by the S.P.C.A.*

In the Netherlands, and back in the Dutch East Indies, the authorities were not happy. Firstly, such a well-publicised expedition would surely open the floodgates for other institutions to expect similar treatment, and how should they to deal with that? There were regulations preventing hunting and capture in place, yet Burden had demonstrated how easy it was to bypass them, highlighting the hypocrisy embedded in the way the regulations were enforced. In 1928 Eugene Dubois, the famous paleoanthropologist and discover of 'Java Man', would address the Dutch Parliament, to voice his grave concerns about Burden having been allowed

to capture so many specimens of such a rare species, even if under the auspices of a scientific institution. Also, to add insult to injury, costly government resources, in the form of the *SS Dog* and its crew, had been gifted to facilitate the taking of a rare animal from its environment. His and others' concerns led the way forward for more comprehensive and strictly imposed conservation measures for all desirable but threatened exotic creatures throughout the East Indies. Such an event would never happen again, except illegally.

If American Zoos can have Komodo Dragons, why not the British?

With so much publicity given to the American Expedition, Zoological Societies around the world must have been thinking, 'If the Americans can get them, why not us?' Museums, after all, had been gathering skins and skeletons, both legally and illegally, for some years now. Anyone associated with London Zoo would have seen the huge state-of-the-art Reptile House taking shape during 1926, in readiness for its grand opening in mid-June the following year, but only one or two people would have had the temerity to ask, "What if?... What if we could get our very own Komodo Dragons in time for the opening? What a triumph that would be for the Zoo! But how?" Perhaps the person imaginative enough to ask the question had already devised such a plan. In any case, Dr. Malcolm Smith took responsibility for approaching the East Indian authorities on behalf of the Zoo.

Dr. Malcolm Arthur Smith was born in 1875, and from an early age exhibited an extraordinary interest in Natural History, and especially in Reptiles and Amphibians, which must have grown, unabated, as he developed towards adulthood. Having finished with school, this young man was so determined to pursue his one love that it was said he decided to study medicine, but only as a practical means of living that would allow him to fully indulge his passion for herpetology! That certainly seems to be the way things turned out for him! Qualifying in 1898, at the age of 23, he immediately took up a post as a medical officer with the British Legation in Siam, (now Thailand), based in the capital, Bangkok, where he remained until his 'retirement' at the age of 50, when he returned to Britain in 1925. Whilst there is ample evidence that he found, or made, plenty of time to pursue his interest in the local wildlife, notably reptiles, this did not prevent him from distinguishing himself in his professional life, as for five years he had the additional honour of being appointed as one of the Court Physicians to Siam's Royal Family, and in particular the monarch, Queen Saowapa, until her death, he being the only one of her medical advisers practising western medicine.

His study of reptiles, however, knew no bounds. During those 27 years in Bangkok he was to become one of the world's leading experts on the reptiles and amphibians of south east Asia, with growing recognition within the larger international scientific community, especially in Europe and the Far East. From 1914 to 1923 he contributed to almost every copy of the Natural History Bulletin of the Siam Society, usually to describe a newly discovered species of snake. He was in regular contact with all the leading herpetologists of his generation and also produced numerous scientific papers describing the species he encountered and their habits, indeed his name is commemorated in the scientific names of six species of reptile. His regular contacts in Britain included George Boulenger of the Natural History Museum, his son, Edward Boulenger, the Curator of Reptiles at London Zoo and Miss Joan Procter, years before she too held that post. When he retired from his colonial posting in 1925 he returned home to be given *bench space* (an honorary position) at the British Museum as a base from which to continue his studies, producing several papers on the herpetofauna of south-east Asia.

It is worth noting too that when Joan Procter, Curator of Reptiles at London Zoo, was fully occupied in setting up and overseeing installation of the New Reptile House, he was given the temporary appointment of Curator of the old Reptile House for the transitional period. Dr. Smith would have discovered that the existing protocols and regulations regarding the capture of dragons had been firmed up within weeks of the American Expedition arriving home, and that

he would need to comply with them to stand any chance of successfully acquiring any for London Zoo.

No more outside groups, however worthy, would be allowed to visit the islands to capture their own giant lizards. His first approach in December 1926, was written 'on behalf of the British Museum', (the base from which he pursued his herpetological research), and sent initially to officials at the British Consulate, situated in Batavia, (now Jakarta, in Java, some 900 miles west of Komodo), requesting their help. Having endorsed the legitimacy of the request and approved it, Josiah Crosby, the British Consul-General then took up the matter, personally forwarding the inquiry 30 miles south to the Department of Agriculture, located in Buitenzorg, (now Bogor). Here is part of his supporting letter:- *"The interest attached to these prehistoric creatures, and the fact that the British Museum is a national institution, impelled me to lend to Dr. Smith the assistance which he requested from me in the matter"*

In addition to being the principal administrative centre, serving the government based in Batavia, Buitenzorg was also the location for the East Indies Botanical Gardens and Zoological Museum and Park. The Director of Agriculture readily issued a Licence for Crosby to arrange the capture and send no more than three living specimens to Britain. Museum staff suggested that for practical assistance in the capture he should write to the *Gezaghebber*, the native leader appointed to serve as District Officer for Middle and South Manggarai, the most heavily populated part of Flores, and Komodo's neighbouring island. However, with fortuitous timing, the Dutch Assistant-Resident, one Henderik Rookmaaker, was given sight of the letter when making a routine visit to the *Gezaghebber*'s base in Ruteng, on his way back to Ende from an exploratory trip to Komodo. He said immediately he would prefer to take over and organise the dragon hunt himself. I think it pertinent at this point to discover a little more about Rookmaaker, as he became such a key figure in the supply of dragons to zoos in the late 1920s.

Henderik Roelof Rookmaaker was a keen career-diplomat who had spent the larger part of his life in the East Indies, and was steadily rising through the ranks of local government. His life-long interest in wildlife was well-known, and he was often pictured holding an animal of some sort in family photos. At the age of 40 he was already respected as a serious naturalist and, unusually for that day and age, as a forest conservationist, which would have meant he was in contact with like-minded people and the scientific community throughout the Far East as well as in Europe, as evidenced by at least one frog, a mollusc and a bird being officially named after him around this period.

The surrounding jungle habitat was virtually his second home, where he would often mount expeditions for friends and his own young children. It can be no accident that in 1926 it was he who was promoted to the post of 'Assistant-Resident' responsible for the administration of the island of Flores and the neighbouring small cluster of islands which included Komodo, Rintja, Sumbawa and Sumba, all home to the Komodo Dragon, as right from the start he was involved in supplying them to zoos and scientific institutions.

Word must have got back to London that approval had been given for the capture of two or three dragons, as the eminent naturalist and museum owner, Lord Walter Rothschild, made a surprise announcement, during his address to the Scientific Meeting of the Zoological Society of London on the subject of Komodo Dragons, as reported in The Times Newspaper of 26th February, 1927:

THE DRAGONS OF KOMODO GIANT LIZARDS FOR THE ZOO
At the last Scientific Meeting of the Zoological Society of London Lord Rothschild exhibited a mounted example. It was announced Lord Rothschild had taken steps to obtain and present to the Zoo two living examples of the Komodo "dragon."

Whether it is true or not that Lord Rothschild had a hand in the acquisition of the dragons is uncertain, as this newspaper cutting alone contains the sole reference to his name in the matter. All other records, including his personal archive in the Natural History Museum, point to Dr. Smith as the principal player, and, as we will see later, Malcolm Smith was given all the credit.

The hunt is on...

It was ideal that the coastal port town of Lubuan Bajo should be situated at the most westerly point of the island of Flores. Now it boasts an airport and serves as the gateway to Komodo National Park, but it was always a fishing port, and less than 20 miles sailing distance from the islands of Komodo and Rintja. Here was a ready source of the boats needed to carry 200 men, tents etc. and 12 crates for the transport of the dragons. I presume Rookmaaker promised the fishermen better wages than they would usually earn to persuade them to give up fishing for a week to become part of this risky venture.

That would have been but one detail in what must have been a masterpiece of planning, including communication with the leading herpetologists associated with major European Zoos at the early planning phase, to the extent that Rookmaaker would be *catching to order*. The five zoos that we know were chosen to receive a pair each were Surabaja Zoo, on the island of Java, (part of the Dutch East Indies); Amsterdam and Rotterdam Zoos, in the Netherlands, (logical choices); then Berlin Aquarium and London Zoo; (and possibly one other, perhaps Frankfurt, but we do not know).

As we have read, 12 dragons were indeed captured but, by the time they reached their first staging post at Ende on the south coast of Flores a few days after capture, two were dead, leaving 10. I have not been able to discover if the two that died had been promised to a particular zoo or not. Of that ten, four European zoos were selected to receive eight between them, of which only three of them were destined to survive any length of time:-

Three died en route.

One died after three months on display at Amsterdam.

One died at Rotterdam after four months.

However the one which made it to Berlin became an extremely tame and popular exhibit, surviving until 1944, whilst the two received at London Zoo did very well too, as we shall learn. The two that stayed behind were placed in the zoo at Surabaja on the island of Java, also part of the East Indies group of islands, but how long they survived is not known.

Having set out with such high hopes for the expedition's success, only three of the 12 caught are known to have survived for certain, five at best.

Rookmaaker's second dragon hunt in 1927

Rookmaaker carried out a further dragon hunt in 1927, before leaving Flores in 1928 for another posting of Assistant-Resident elsewhere, (but the reader will be pleased to learn that he was ultimately and deservedly promoted to the title of 'Resident' in his own right within a few years!). By chance, another eminent herpetologist, Professor Robert Friedrich Wilhelm Mertens, associated with Frankfurt Zoo, had been part of a collecting trip visited the area in 1927, but was now unable to berth at Komodo or Rintja himself, as planned, because of the latest strict regulations controlling capture of the lizards. Somehow he was able to make contact with Henderik Rookmaaker and ask him directly if he would be prepared to make a return trip, with a team of natives, to Rintja that June to capture more dragons on his behalf, to which Rookmaaker agreed! Two more dragons were duly captured with relative ease, which Rookmaaker was able to deliver personally to Mertens, at Rana Mese, a lake situated near Ruteng, on Flores, on 26th June, so that he could take them back to Germany himself, with the

other animals they had caught. Unfortunately one was discovered to have a badly injured mouth from its capture, so the Professor decided reluctantly to kill it, but the other, Bubchen, thrived to become a very popular exhibit for over 16 years until accidentally killed as a result of an Allied bombing raid which involved the Aquarium on 18th March, 1944.

The journey of Smith's dragons from their island home to London

From existing records we can trace the progress of our pair's voyage to London. In all likelihood the date of their capture was 28th March, 1927. Imagine the excitement and hullabaloo as each specimen was caught..... one of the crates would be called for and carried over, then the creature released from its noose and transferred into it, by some very brave men! Much heavier now, each crate had then to be carried back to the coast, loaded onto one of the fishing boats to either sail back to their home port, Lubuan Bajo on the NE tip of Flores, to complete the journey by road to the larger sea port of Ende on the south coast, or perhaps they sailed directly all the way round to Ende. In either case, that is where all 12 specimens were destined to be held for a few days at Rookmaaker's official residence.

The 10 dragons that were still alive on the 4th of April departed from Ende on the Steamer *De Klerk*, westward bound for the safe harbour of Surabaja in Java, where they arrived on 11th April, where eight were immediately transferred to the Surabaja Zoological Gardens by zoo staff, (six for temporary holding before travelling on to Europe, and two to remain there on permanent display).

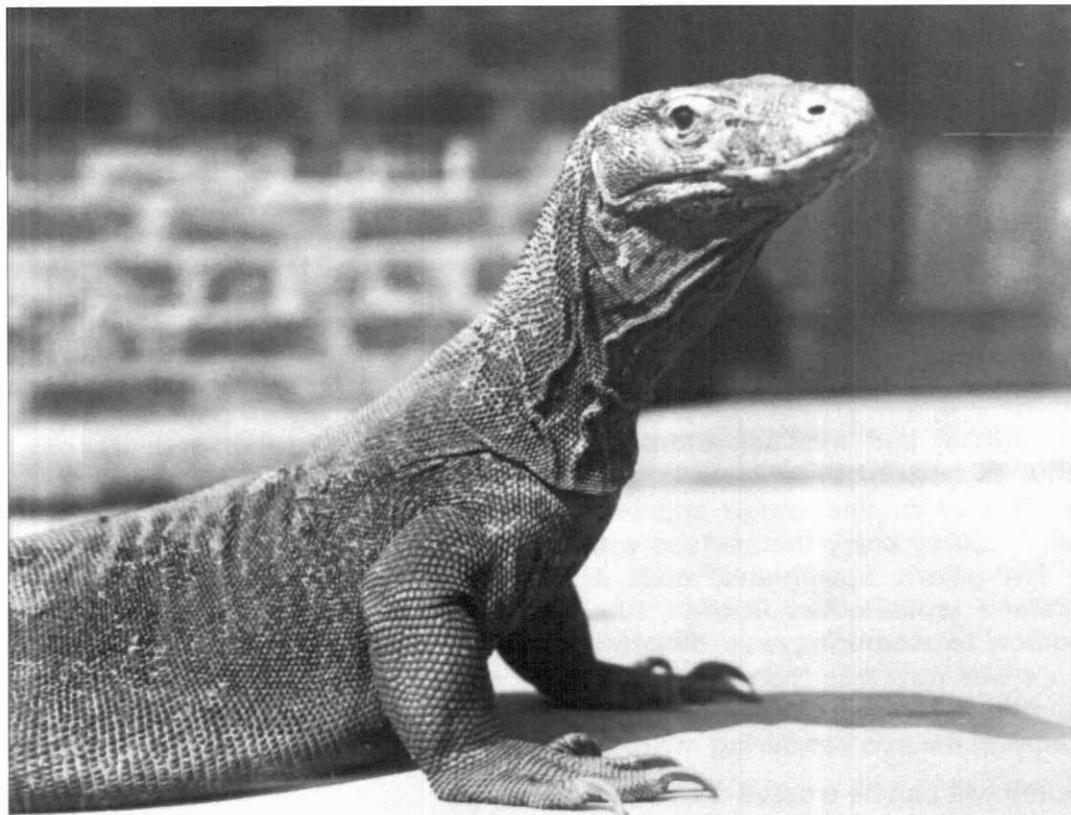
London Zoo's pair remained on the *De Klerk* to continue their journey towards the north west coast of Java and the Capital of the East Indies, Batavia, (now Jakarta), berthing at its busy port of Priok on the 14th April, where they became guests of the British Consulate for a week. I imagine it would have been at this point that London got the message that the Dragons were on their way, as they sailed away from Batavia on the *SS Phrontis* of the Blue Funnel Line on 23rd April. They arrived in London six weeks later, on Monday, 6th June, to be met by Dr. Malcolm Smith, who took them straight to London Zoo, without delay.

That Dr. Malcolm Smith was given all the credit for procuring London Zoo's first 'dragons' is surely attested by the following items from publications of the day:

In one of these cages is to be found the best kept secret of the new reptile house. Through the kindness of Dr. Malcolm Smith, a Fellow of the Society, two living examples of the famous "dragons" of Komodo, not full-grown creatures, but over seven feet long, and the first living examples to reach Europe. (Times 15/6/27)

"It was also agreed to pay the Life Composition fee of Dr. Malcolm Smith, FZS, since 1917, in consideration of the special services given to the Society by his temporary charge of the old Reptile House and his procuring of two specimens of the Komodo Monitor (dragon) for exhibition in the Gardens during their life and subsequent gift to the British Museum (Nat. Hist.)." (Minutes of ZSL Council Meeting, 15/6/27).

They were obtained for us by Dr. Malcolm Smith, the herpetologist, to whom they were sent by the Governor of the Dutch East Indies, and as soon as we knew that they had been shipped we began to arrange a perfect home for them in the new house. (from 'Dragons that are alive today' in the magazine, 'Wonders of Animal Life', 16/10/28).



Portrait of
Sumbawa

Photo:
Frederick
Bond

The dragons were not 'presented' to London Zoo, but were the personal gift of Andries Cornelis Dirk de Graeff, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, to Malcolm Smith himself, and remained his personal property, whilst kept in the Zoo, until he donated them to the British Museum when each of them died. This does not mean that money did not change hands after their arrival. Indeed Consular officials had expressed a willingness to pay up to £50 for each animal on behalf of the Zoo right from the outset. In fact Rookmaaker presented an invoice for 189.60f Dutch guilders for his costs, (176.75f), and the steamer freight charge to Batavia, (12.85f), making a converted total for the Zoo of only £17!

The Curator of Reptiles at that time was the relatively young Miss Joan Procter, already a celebrated reptile and amphibian expert, and it seems appropriate to me that she should take over the telling of the Dragons' story in her own words at this stage, as it was her newly opened Reptile House into which they were received. 16 months after their arrival at the Zoo she published a very interesting account of her experiences with these wonderful creatures in an illustrated article she wrote entitled, '*Dragons that are alive today*' for the first edition on 16th October, 1928, of a fortnightly magazine called '*Wonders of Animal Life*'. This article, which was also later re-published as chapter IV of a book with the same title, is set out in full below.

MISS JOAN PROCTOR'S ACCOUNT OF THE DRAGONS' FIRST YEAR AT THE ZOO

We come to the much happier dragons in the New Reptile House at the London Zoo. They arrived on Whit Sunday, 1927. We christened them Sumba and Sumbawa, and they are now almost as well known and as much photographed as Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford.

They were obtained for us by Dr. Malcolm Smith, the herpetologist, to whom they were sent by the Governor of the Dutch East Indies, and as soon as we knew that they had been shipped we began to arrange a perfect home for them in the new house.

Their enclosure contains a cave, electrically heated rocks, a swimming pool, growing palm-trees, over-head heat-beam radiators and ultra-violet artificial sunlight lamps, focussed in parallel, vita-glass lights (windows), and other arrangements, which working together, produce a miniature Komodo, with correct climate and surroundings.

Owing to the enormous strength of the lizards, the ceiling apparatus had to be protected by steel bars, and the lower portions of the partitions are disguised sheet metal. We also provided four doors, one in each corner of the enclosure, for the safety of keepers, because, according to the American accounts, the dragons might be expected to be ferocity personified.

When the dragons arrived, they were ill and miserable; so we gave them warm baths, drinks, and medical attention. It is not possible to give their correct lengths, as both of them have lost quite six inches of tail, but they are about seven feet each, and weigh approximately between four and a half and five stones. ...they carry themselves with such dignity, and are so muscular, that even half-grown specimens must appear alarming to people who do not understand reptiles. Mrs Burden, (the wife of the leader of the 1926 American expedition to Komodo), was evidently terrified by them, for she writes: "The creature was now less than five yards away, and its subtle reptilian smell was in my nostrils. Too late to leap from hiding. If I did, he would surely spring upon me, rending me and devouring my remains as he had devoured the dead deer."

Yet Sumbawa can be trusted with small children!

In fact almost everything that has been written about these dragons proves to be inaccurate. After the opportunity of studying the lives and domestic routines of our now perfectly healthy, spirited, and normal Sumba and Sumbawa for over 15 months, it seems amazing that so much nonsense should have found its way into scientific literature! One of the worst items is that the species is described as stone-deaf, when in actual fact they have the same sense of hearing as the other members of the genus.

Of course it is very difficult to test the hearing of wild animals, but the fact that they frequently take no obvious notice of sounds is no proof whatever that they are deaf. On Komodo Island what have they to fear, and consequently to listen for? The only large mammals are buffalo and harmless deer; all other creatures on the island, such as pig, and smaller mammals, water-fowl, smaller monitors, and so on, are preyed upon by dragons, who hunt by sight and smell. Experiments show, however, that our Sumba and Sumbawa will turn their heads sharply when called now that they have learned to associate the call with food, but, of course, only if they are hungry, and if they feel in a responsive mood. I have on these occasions taken great Care that they should not catch sight of me, or pick up vibrations of footsteps. If you take up a Siamese cat, as another example of a protected animal of independent character, you will find that it will not so much as turn its head when you speak to it, unless it happens to feel in the mood; why should it? And if you call to it to come in when it is stalking birds, it will not pay the slightest attention to you, and yet who would dare to say that cats are deaf? The behaviour of these lizards cannot be construed on the same lines as that of domestic dogs, or timorous antelopes.

Then there is the question of the way the eyes are described, and also portrayed in the stuffed specimens, as beady. The living lizards have large, very bright, and gentle eyes, like the eyes of Alsatian wolf-dogs. And the upper lid is not at all flattened or beetly, but rounded, and of a pale lemon yellow, like the long lithe tongue.

The question of the ferocity of these lizards is, perhaps, the most misunderstood of all. All the lizards of the genus *Varanus* are savage, predatory, and highly strung, and they use their teeth, claws and slashing tails with great effect, as I have personal cause to know. At the Zoo we consider any large monitor more dangerous to deal with than a crocodile twice its size. But, allowing for this, *V. Komodoensis* is the gentlest, most intelligent, and most tractable of them all. This is comparing them with specimens only half their weight of species such as *niloticus*, *albigularis*, *bengalensis*, *salvator*, *nebulosus*, *varius*, and so on. It is quite true that they are very nervous, and also that they could no doubt kill one if they wished, or give a terrible bite when taking food from the hand greedily, but there is no vice in them.

Sumba is the more nervous of the two, and if he is meddled with or bothered, as for instance if one picks ticks off him, or if he is frightened, he will turn at bay and open a large red mouth. He also slashes with his tail, but on the other hand he takes food from our hands, and will sometimes permit his head to be stroked and his back scratched. Sumbawa, the heavier, larger dragon, has never attempted to bite at all, even though she has had to submit to surgical dressings, cauterization of septic tick-bites, and daily dental treatment. The more treatment she receives the more tractable and gentle she becomes.

When they first arrived they both required a great many painful dressings, for they had canker of the jaw, injured tails, septic paws, torn claws, and abscesses. Now, however, they are very well, greedy, and generally fit. There is nothing of the craven captive about either of them, and there is also no question of their being sluggish, for they have a tropical climate, and about eight hours of artificial sunlight each day. Sumbawa comes for daily walks with me on my rounds of inspection, investigating everything that might be of interest.

She has no objection to my holding the end of her tail and using it as a rudder, and she is good at walking up and down stairs. Only a few weeks after her arrival she gave a children's tea-party, and she does not mind small children bullying her. Except when she is actually bolting food, she is absolutely safe. When she is in a tiresome mood one can wrestle with her, and she will struggle like a naughty child and persist in what she is doing, but she never bites or attacks. Of what other reptile of that or any other weight can this be said? For one must always remember that it is certainly true that these monitors do tear down pig and deer and swallow large fowls in two gulps. Certainly I dare not touch our large *V. Salvator* without two men to help. But *V. Komodoensis* has the natural temperament of a nice large dog, and I am not quoting from our own London Zoo dragons alone, for I have just heard that one has arrived in Berlin, and that this specimen is also really gentle with human beings.

Like most intelligent creatures they have varying fancies about food. Sometimes it is large fowls and at others vast quantities of eggs, each one carefully picked up whole. Both Sumba and Sumbawa will take an egg off a spoon very neatly, but to give some idea of the strength of their jaws it must be added that once Sumbawa bit the spoon off the handle along with the egg, and it was a very stout metal tablespoon! Sumba, having grasped the fact that his mate gets more food than he does by coming out among the public, has now become a "gate-



crasher," which is a little tiresome, because his manners are not so reliable. So now that we are in a position to understand the psychology of these terrible dragons we are more surprised with them than ever. But personally I prefer to enjoy their friendship in London, and not to visit them on Komodo for the purpose of trapping and shooting them. On the whole, two healthy living specimens teach far more about the species than many dead ones stuffed. And as even dragons are mortal, the British Museum will ultimately receive their bodies for morphological research.

The dragons become celebrities

Whenever I browse through the Zoological Society Library's collection of newspaper cuttings it is apparent that there was an appetite amongst the public at that time for any zoo-related news, such as new buildings, new species exhibited, stories regarding popular 'characters', especially deaths, zoo babies, shocking incidents like fights between animals or escapes, hot days, wet days, crowded days, the list could go on... When there was good news the Zoo would often issue press-calls, inviting newspapermen to attend some event or other; though for less good news the papers probably relied upon the occasional 'tip-off', and sometimes, perhaps on a lean news day, a reporter or a photographer would be sent to the Zoo to find a story, or take some photos, usually designed to amuse the reader. It was no surprise, therefore, that the arrival of the dragons became common knowledge in a short space of time.

After reporting the 'fun and games' involved in the transfer of dangerous snakes and obstreperous crocodilians from the old to the new Reptile House for a day or two, there was still its Opening Day on Wednesday, the 15th June, 1927 to record, along with descriptions of all its technical innovations to fill plenty of column inches, plus the introduction of its newest celebrities, the awesome Komodo Dragons, with dramatic photos for all to see. Having excelled themselves in making the subject of reptiles and dragons somehow exciting, there was an uncomfortable dearth of similar follow-up stories in the papers for a couple of weeks, until the *Illustrated London News* filled the breach with an imaginative full Front Cover painting entitled,

A "DRAGON" AS "PATIENT": MISS PROCTER, CURATOR OF REPTILES AT THE ZOO, TREATING A GIANT LIZARD, HELD DOWN BY SIX STRONG MEN, FOR CANKER OF THE MOUTH.

Yes, 'enormously strong' and fearsome creatures were once again on the front page! In reality that was old news, describing the precautions taken for the very first treatment in early June, but since then the number of men needed to restrain Sumbawa had fallen from six, to five, to four, and to three by the date of the above article. In fact the real news, and the latest news, was that the process had somehow succeeded in taming this wonderful beast! I imagine the taming process wasn't simply one of subjugation by hefty men, but I'm guessing that perhaps tasty dead chickens or eggs figured in the process at some points... However, it was to be some months before the public at large knew of this development.

Sumba, the other dragon, on display from the start, however, was causing concern for another reason, we learned from The Sunday News of 3/7/27 headline, "**DRAGON" GOES ON HUNGER STRIKE,**" stating, '*It refuses all kinds of delicacies, except an occasional egg.*' The striking illustration shows Sumba apparently ignoring the dead pigeon beside him. I can find no further mention of this, and Sumba was to survive for another 12 years! However, I discovered a much later article by Edward Boulenger, the Director of the Zoo Aquarium, in which he stated that, "...*the Komodo dragon will select a white fowl, pigeon or rabbit in preference to one of grey, brown or black hue*". Could that have been the key to restoring his appetite?

The dragons' next newspaper mention was in the Daily Chronicle of 2/12/27, where a small article has the amazing headlines,

ZOO'S TAME DRAGONS AND DAINTRIES FOR MONSTERS SAID TO DEVOUR PONIES.

Part of the article reads as follows:

Once a terror to the inhabitants of their home in the Malayan archipelago, the Zoo Komodo lizards have so far forgotten the traditions of their race as to crawl onto the public barrier, when their cage door is opened, and take eggs and other morsels from the fingers of their keeper.

Within six months they have become tame! To be accurate it was Sumbawa, the female, who had become reliably tame.

The words, '***the... lizards... crawl onto the public barrier, when their cage door is opened,***' intrigued me, so I visited the Zoo to investigate. The enclosure once used for the Dragons is easy to locate on the landing reached by small flights of stairs at either side of the far end of the Reptile House. The whole of the front of the enclosure is composed of a steel framework into which large panes of glass are set at hip-height, plus four hinged windows, roughly 3' x 2', set into the framework at various points along its length. Each of these opens fully outwards and is protected by a padlock. The public safety barrier is the usual mounted wooden hand rail set on a metal balustrade, 2 foot 2 inches in front of the cage, with a void in between. In short, my inspection did nothing to solve the riddle, and I was no wiser after reading this lovely item in the Evening News, printed a fortnight later:

DRAGON AS NEW ZOO KEEPER. DAILY TOUR OF REPTILE HOUSE.

The reptile house at the Zoo has a new head keeper. It is now Sumbawa, the Komodo dragon, who carries out a daily inspection of the premises, writes a Zoological correspondent. When he arrived, early in the year, Sumbawa was very shy and kept to the back of his cage, concealing himself so carefully that many visitors thought the cage was empty. Then on warm days in summer he was tethered in the open on one of the lawns and speedily overcame his shyness. Now he regularly places himself in a prominent position in his cage where he can see all that goes on in the house, and be seen.

TOUR OF HOUSE.

Nowadays Sumbawa is always at the gate of his cage to welcome the keeper, and reminds one of an orderly officer about to make his rounds. After the greeting "Good morning, keeper," he solemnly walks out and together they make a tour of the house.

The tour complete and every corner thoroughly inspected, Sumbawa goes back to his cage, climbs into a prominent position, and, turning to the keeper, says "Very good, carry on, keeper." Then, and not until then, the keeper opens the doors of the house and the day officially begins. The keeper and Sumbawa would be very disappointed if for any reason this little ceremony had to be discontinued.

Within six months of her arrival, Sumbawa's incredible docility had become 'the story', whilst after 12 months a capacity for patience, fortitude and affection seem to have been added to her virtues by journalists, judging from this article in *The Times* of 30/6/28, if I may quote at length...

REPTILES AT THE ZOO A DRAGON'S WOUNDS CAUTERIZED

Early visitors to the Reptile House last Wednesday witnessed a spectacle even more surprising than it looked. One of the two Komodo dragons which arrived just over a year ago was badly infested with ticks. These were removed before it was put on view, but some of the wounds have not healed, and have turned into deep abscesses. The dragon weighs five stones, is over 8ft. In length, is extremely active, and has jaws powerful enough to bite off a man's arm. By constant handling and petting, however, its confidence has been won, and, although it is nervous and easily startled, almost anything can be done with it, and Miss Procter, the Curator, decided that its wounds must be cleaned, cauterized, and dressed.

On Wednesday morning, accordingly, a glass surgical table was wheeled up, and rope barriers stretched across the platform in front of the south dens, to keep back any early visitors. The cage door was opened, and Miss Procter called, waving a tuft of cotton wool, which the dragon may have mistaken for a white rat or rabbit. The dragon at once rushed out from its den under the rocks, climbed over the sill, and came out on the platform. Two sturdy keepers stood by, to control the tail or stop a sudden dash if the reptile took alarm. The curator and her assistant stroked and petted it, and gave it a raw egg, which it took with great pains to avoid losing any of the contents as it crushed the shell. Then the Curator got to work, her assistant handing the probes and forceps exactly as in a surgical ward. Each sinus was thoroughly cleaned out and cauterized. The silver nitrate clearly hurt considerably, but intervals for stroking and petting and the administration of an occasional egg kept the proceedings on friendly terms.

It was remarkable to see the dragon, just after it had started and winced, allow its head to be stroked and play its long forked tongue over the arms and face of its lady surgeon, much in the manner of an affectionate dog. In less than half-an-hour every wound was dressed and plugged with iodoform. The wounds now show every sign of doing well. No doubt, the accounts of the ferocity of these dragons on their native island are much exaggerated. But they are powerful, carnivorous creatures, capable of being very dangerous under unskilful or inconsiderate management.

The final triumph for Joan Procter was to present Sumbawa, un-caged and unfettered in any way, at the normally rather stuffy Scientific Meeting of the Zoological Society of London, causing quite a sensation, to put it mildly, as reported by the *Daily Telegraph* on 24/10/28:

TAMED "DRAGON" ISLAND TERROR AS INFANT'S PET CURATOR'S EXHIBIT

The presence of a live, seven-feet long "dragon" at yesterday's scientific meeting of the Zoological Society caused a sensation among members, who arrived at the function prepared to study stuffed or pickled exhibits.

The "dragon," which was being exhibited by Miss Joan Procter, the Society's curator of reptiles, was not kept in a cage, but was allowed to walk about the floor of the meeting-room. "Sumbawa," as the giant lizard is called, did not give a moment's anxiety.

...One of the objects of the exhibition was to refute the statements published even in scientific journals to the effect that the lizard is ferocious and untameable.

...The Zoo specimens were somewhat nervous and not in specially good health on arrival, but under the treatment meted out to them in the new reptile house, which is fitted with artificial sunlight and other appliances, they have become healthy and tame. "Sumbawa" not only follows the curator about the reptile house, and allows herself to be played with by small children, but is actually taken for walks in the gardens during the summer months.

The dragon entertained its audience by devouring a large chicken, a pigeon, and half a dozen eggs whilst its curator was discoursing on its habits.

This event is well documented, as Joan Proctor was invited on this occasion to write out the formal account of the meeting and her address to the assembled Fellows for the official record of the Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London. Much of her report duplicated what she had written for the animal magazine, but here are three sections of interest:

The author exhibited one of them, un-caged and unchained, in order to point out how much nonsense has been published about the ferocity of the species. The dragon, whose name is Sumbawa, walked about a very long table, and without paying any attention to the audience ate a large fowl, several eggs, and a pigeon from her hand, allowing itself to be scratched and patted even when swallowing the fowl with enormous gulps, treatment which even dogs will not always permit. This dragon is accustomed to go for walks, and has never at any time tried to bite, although it could no doubt kill a person if it tried.

Also, she dislikes having her tympanum touched, and behaves as if it were very sensitive.

As it is true that most species of *Varanus* are very savage, and, when large, dangerous to handle, it seems amazing that the largest of them all should be so tractable and easily tamed. The accompanying text-figure shows a baby two years old patting Sumbawa. It is a perfectly genuine photograph, and no precautions were taken. Sumbawa would tear a pig to pieces but she can be trusted with children, which seems to show a high order of intelligence when one considers that the genus dates from Eocene times and that *V. Komodoensis* is one of the more primitive species.

Can be Trusted with Children?

Permit me to remind you what we have just read above, from the pen of the Curator of Reptiles...

Only a few weeks after her arrival she gave a children's tea-party, and she does not mind small children bullying her. The accompanying text-figure shows a baby two years old patting Sumbawa. It is a perfectly genuine photograph, and no precautions were taken. Sumbawa would tear a pig to pieces but she can be trusted with children.

It is clear to me that in the space of a few months Sumbawa became Joan Proctor's pride and joy; a feeling no doubt shared by her keeper colleagues in the Reptile House. First there was the triumph of the dragons being installed in the Reptile House, just in time for its opening on the 15th June, then the private satisfaction for the staff of experiencing its growing trust in them, to the extent of relaxing, rather than struggling or defending herself, when they picked her off the floor to be placed and restrained upon the treatment table, so that gradually less men were needed to do this. I have no doubt that some form of 'positive reinforcement', like a tasty chicken or some raw eggs, figured in the procedure at some point, but an unexpected end result was a tame Komodo Dragon! It would be so typical of Miss Proctor's lively brain to then

set about the task of exploring the nature and limits of this docility, both as a scientist, and surely for the sheer fun of it!

St. George and the Dragon.

Sumbawa tolerates a small boy within the dragon's enclosure

*Photo:
Frederick Bond*



Sumbawa allowed herself to be stroked and petted, which seemed to sooth and settle her, and would explore Miss Proctor's and the keepers' skin with her tongue, without once baring those fearful teeth. She would have got into the habit of coming forward and presenting herself as soon as the keepers arrived, ready to be lifted onto the table in anticipation of a reward, so that they began to compare her with other tamed creatures, common enough throughout the Zoo of the 1920s. I guess someone mooted the idea that perhaps it would be possible to take her for a walk around the grounds on a lead, like a dog, so a sturdy harness was devised and the experiment began. Creating a routine for Sumbawa could not really begin until she was installed with Sumba in the exhibition cage, but how to release her from it easily? I believe I found the answer in a newspaper cutting from 1932, where Sumbawa is shown meeting children for a film that was being made, and she is clearly seen resting her weight on a simply fashioned board securely spanning the 22 inch gap between the small cage door and the public safety barrier. My guess is that the small door would be opened, then the board set in place, so that two keepers could lift her off and set her down on the floor. From here the routine of the daily circuit of the Reptile House would have developed, perhaps testing her walking with and without the harness, and at some point Miss Proctor would have discovered that not only did she not mind her tail being held while she walked, but was willing to be guided to the left or the right by a slight twist to the tail!

The next stage would have been to abandon the controlled situation of the Reptile House and take her outdoors to meet people. Surely this exposure to a variety of unpredictable strangers would have been conducted in a thoughtful and gradual way, with progressively younger visitors increasingly allowed to pat, stroke, and push her no doubt, with hands permitted ever closer to her head, and that mouth, until Miss Proctor could make the remarkable statements we have read above with complete confidence. With complete confidence! To my 21st Century *Healthy and Safety* conscious mind-set this all seems quite preposterous, yet she got away with it!

There are only a few photographs showing Sumbawa with children, but they are impressive. One of the most charming is from a *Daily Telegraph* newspaper cutting, dated June 2nd 1933, where Sumbawa appears to be playing host to 11 children at a 'Tea Party' held on the roof of the Reptile House to celebrate the sixth anniversary of her arrival at the Zoo. Of course the real host of the party was Dr. Burgess Barnett, the replacement Curator of Reptiles, following the untimely death of Joan Procter in September, 1931. The children all seem pretty 'well-heeled' to me, so one imagines their parents to have been Barnett's associates or Fellows of the Society. The youngsters all seem pretty relaxed in spite of the circumstances, though I guess there are several keepers and other adults on our side of the camera, but it is fascinating to see such an extraordinary tradition, originally created by Miss Proctor, being reinstated like this. Here is some of the text accompanying the picture:

Sumbawa is quite reliable, but as the company included small admirers the St. George of the Reptile House - the keeper who tamed her - remained by her side as a precautionary measure.

Before the party started Sumbawa was lifted out of her cage, followed the keeper to the service passage and, with his assistance, scrambled up the stairs leading to the roof of the house. There she stood to receive the guests, their congratulations and edible offerings - such as eggs. Throughout the proceedings she behaved well, though towards the end she showed signs of boredom.

But she thoroughly enjoyed the tea for, in common with many lizards and iguanas, she has a passion for cream buns and disposed of a fair share of éclairs. She shook hands with the first of the guests to leave, but since she failed thereafter to see the point of having her right forelimb raised from the ground, the others had to be content with patting her on the head.

In contrast with most monitors and large lizards, they became tame within a few weeks of their arrival at the Zoo, and at one time Sumbawa was taken out into the gardens on a chain. But after Sumba had twice attacked his keepers it was considered advisable to treat both as dangerous.

The tea-party has now re-established Sumbawa in her old position as the Zoo's tame dragon.



The photo of the tea party as reported in This Daily Telegraph press cutting in a Zoological Society of London's archives.

Reproduced courtesy of ZSL London Zoo.

Keeping large animals in relatively close confinement is never entirely without problems. The reference above to Sumba having attacked his keepers on two occasions is interesting, as another newspaper report (*Daily Mail*, 8/10/32) gives an account of one of one such incident which seems to give Sumba 'the benefit of the doubt':

BITTEN BY A DRAGON

Bitten by a dragon in London!

That was the experience of Superintendent Budd, of the Reptile House at the Zoo yesterday. He received the bite while feeding one of the 9-feet-long Komodo Dragons (a species of lizard), which are among the queerest inmates of the gardens. He was holding out a dead pigeon when one of the dragons leapt at the pigeon, and, missing its distance, dug its powerful teeth into the keeper's hand. Blood poured from the wound, which was dressed and bound up, and Mr. Budd was rather shaken by the bite.

This incident was also referred to by David Seth-Smith in his 1939 book, '*More Adventures With the Zoo Man*', where he wrote:-

Of the two Komodo Dragons that came to the Zoo several years ago, one became very tame and could be freely handled. That was the one that unfortunately died. The other one is not regarded as safe to touch because, one day, as it was taking a dead pigeon from the hand of its keeper, it accidentally bit his hand. It was not an intentional bite, or it might have resulted in the loss of the hand; but all the same, the man was laid up for several weeks, which shows how severe a bite from one of these animals may be.

I have a suspicion that it may be that Dr. Barnett, who replaced Joan Procter as Curator when she died, was also concerned about the liberties routinely taken with Sumbawa after he had witnessed the two dragons engaged in an occasional dispute, though I can find no record or description of any aggression between them, other than this small report in the Manchester Guardian of 31/3/32:-

"Sumbawa", the Komodo Dragon, who was bitten by Sumba, has now discarded his bandage. As these giant lizards go for anything white, thinking it may be a white rat, the bandage had to be stained with Friar's Balsam to prevent Sumba nosing round it.

Also it is curious to note that the book of early Zoo photographs, '*Golden Days*' contains a photo of Sumbawa with a keeper, with the caption:-

Komodo Dragon 'Sumbawa', with keeper Budd (1928). The scar on the reptile's neck was caused by a crocodile bite.

F. W. Bond, who took the photo, always kept meticulous records, with handwritten notes on the brown paper envelopes containing his glass plate negatives, no doubt writing whatever keepers told him. Small crocodilians may have been displayed in the small neighbouring cage, but could they ever have come into contact with the dragons? My money is on Sumba being the culprit, perhaps when they were first re-integrated late in 1927.

That keepers are capable of being careless, however, cannot be denied, as testified by the following anecdote in Seth-Smith's book:-

In the Zoo these animals are fed upon dead rabbits, chickens and pigeons, as well as raw meat and eggs. They will swallow a whole large rabbit with ease and think nothing of a few dozen eggs or a large fowl with all the feathers on. Some time ago, when an alteration was being made to the dragons' cage, the two occupants were temporarily transferred to an open passage in the Reptile House. Here the day's food for the house was placed, and when the keeper came along he found that one dragon had consumed a whole bucketful of meat, while the other had demolished two dead fowls and was just tackling the third.



Books about London Zoo and its inmates were quite popular amongst the general public in the 1920s. People could read anecdotes about particular animals, usually named, or news regarding some of the 'houses' in the Zoo, and then check them out on their next visit. I believe return trips to the Zoo were probably much more common than would be the case now. Such books were written by a select group of writers, people who were 'in the know'. Generally these were individuals with an official role at the Zoo, usually a curator of a department, but one or two Fellows of the Society, such as Miss Helen Sidebotham, were also popular writers, though it should be said in her case that most of the content of her books had been printed previously in the columns of

newspapers. Some Fellows were frequent visitors to the Zoo, and would gradually make friends with keepers, especially head keepers of particular sections, where the occasional tip might open the door for closer relationships with certain animals, and zoo gossip would be exchanged, sometimes to find its way into popular books about the Zoo and its animals.

The story of Sumba and Sumbawa was usually considered worthy of a mention in contemporary books, but seldom in much more detail than to state the basic facts, and perhaps include one anecdote. Edward Boulenger, in 'Zoo Cavalcade', wrote: **So at home, however, have these reptiles become that they now allow themselves to be caressed, and even led about on a lead**, although he does describe briefly two incidents, including Sumbawa's appearance at the Society's Scientific Meeting. His amusing anecdote about the dragons reads thus:-

The strength of these reptiles may be gauged from the fact that during one of these walks Sumba (Sumbawa) pushed open with head and foot the main door of the house, which taxes the strength of some, and defies the efforts of most children. Once free of the house the dragon made for the outdoor monkey cages opposite, which it caused some commotion, incidentally taking the tulip bed in its stride. As the gardener observed later: 'It looked as though a tank had gone through it'.

There is a lovely photograph of Sumbawa with a keeper, climbing four steps on her way back to the house, cut out from the Daily Telegraph of 11/12/31, recording the same incident, with the caption:-

SUMBAWA, the Zoo "dragon" which escaped from the Reptile House and created great alarm among the monkeys.

In the early 1930s Sumbawa would continue to make celebrity appearances from time to time, as in the film and 'birthday' tea parties mentioned earlier, though I suspect that under the new Curator of Reptiles informal 'encounters' with the public became less common than had previously been the case, while she continued to be regarded as one of the Zoo's 'star animals' when it came to matters of publicity.

Sumbawa's death on Monday, January 29th, 1934, seems to have come as a surprise to her keepers, as she had not been mentioned in the 'Unwell' column of the Daily Occurrences Book on the previous few days. What a horrible shock for them, to find such a popular creature dead when they arrived for work that morning. A further surprise awaited them when the results of the routine post mortem examination were announced. In addition to the cause of death being reported as Endocarditis, 'she' was found to have been a *male* dragon all along!

As promised, Dr. Malcolm Smith, who still retained ownership of these two dragons whilst at the Zoo, donated his remains to the Natural History Museum, where the penis, tongue and skeleton were retained and preserved. The skin was used by the firm of Rowland Ward, the renowned taxidermists, to cast two models of Sumbawa which can be visited to this day, one at South Kensington, the other at the Tring branch of the Natural History Museum. Later that same year Bryan Walter Guinness, an heir to the Guinness brewing fortune, and created Baron (Lord) Moyne in 1932, determined that he would like to sail to the Far East in his private yacht, with the principal goal of capturing more Komodo dragons for London Zoo. True to his word, he was able to present the Zoo with an additional pair on 1st May, 1935, though, for their own safety, these would never be companions for Sumba, who was to survive until October 23rd 1939, when he was discovered to have 'hind quarter paralysis', presumably after a fall. Being unable to move, there was nothing for it but to euthanize him there and then. His body too was presented to the Museum, where it is reported to have been preserved in a bath of formalin, and has resided ever since, such being the practices of natural history museums.

These two Komodo dragons gave such a huge amount of interest and pleasure to so many visitors, both young and old, not to mention Miss Joan Procter and the fortunate men entrusted with their care, that I felt their story should be recorded for others to read 90 years on...

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Proceedings of the ZSL;
Minutes of ZSL Council Meetings, (wonderful handwritten records);
and the photos of Frederick William Bond.

All photographs used in this article, unless otherwise captioned, are by Frederick William Bond and are reproduced by courtesy of ZSL London Zoo.

Special thanks also to Tim May, for reading and advising on an early draft, and to Katherine Corcoran for proof reading the final copy and her welcome suggestions.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of **André Verstraete**, (24/1/54 - 5/2/10), a Founder Member of the Bartlett Society, personal friend, and fellow 'Dragon' enthusiast.



Valentine's postcard with caption on the reverse: "The Dragon's Tea Party. Sunbawa [sic], the London Zoo's tame dragon holds a tea party with Marmaduke, the 200 year old tortoise and the baby alligator (right)." Although, of course, the alligator is in the centre. - **Ed.**