

THE KOMODO DRAGON



CHARACTERISTICS

It looks like a dragon from legend. Moreover, the Komodo dragon is the biggest and heaviest lizard in the world, and it is also known as the Komodo monitor. The Komodo dragon weighs between 100 and 165 kg and measures between two and three metres in length. One has to imagine the fear it struck into the Dutch pearl fishers who discovered it in 1910! This strange animal is dark green, brown, grey, or black in colour, and it was almost unknown at the time. It lives on only a few islands in Central Indonesia: Komodo, Flores, and Rinca, having become extinct on Padar. That protected habitat

<i>Kingdom</i>	Animal
<i>Phylum</i>	Chordata
<i>Class</i>	Reptilia
<i>Order</i>	Squamata
<i>Family</i>	Varanidae
<i>Genus</i>	Varanus
<i>Latin name</i>	Varanus komodoensis
<i>Weight</i>	100 to 165 kg
<i>Length</i>	2 to 3 m
<i>Laying season</i>	July to September
<i>Incubation period</i>	9 months
<i>Number of eggs</i>	20 to 25
<i>Diet</i>	Carnivore
<i>Longevity</i>	50 years
<i>IUCN status</i>	Vulnerable



The Komodo dragon weighs an average of 80 kg, and can reach 3 metres in length.

and the absence of other predators explain that the species has been able to reach such a gigantic size over generations, to the point of finding itself at the top of the food chain. However, that is not its only asset. This extraordinary hunter has over 60 pointed teeth, like the blade of a saw. That makes its bite very powerful – and even if the prey manages to escape, the Komodo dragon leaves it no chance: its saliva is rendered toxic by legions of bacteria. The monitor lizard just has to wait for its meal to succumb to the venom. In any case, it prefers carrion, deer, boar, invertebrates, birds, etc. It can eat up to 80% of its own weight at a single meal. That voracious appetite has contributed to the enormous lizard's rather fearsome reputation. We have not yet spoken of its appearance, which is

The Komodo dragon is a saurian, which makes it one of the last survivors from prehistory.



After fights, some males present very deep wounds.

far from reassuring. The monitor lizard appears to be protected by scaly armour in the form of cones, and it has a well-muscled neck and tail.

With its short legs ending in sharp claws, the Komodo dragon is not a fast mover. However, it can find its prey from several kilometres away. Its sense of smell is exceedingly sharp. The reptile has a forked tongue like those of snakes. That makes it able to tell the direction from which smells come. That makes for a dangerous animal, because "ora", as the indigenous inhabitants call it, can kill a human. In Komodo National Park, which was set up in 1980 to protect it, visitors are forbidden from wandering alone without a gamekeeper. Of course, attacks are very rare. Of the two species, it is not our own that has the most to fear. *Varanus komodoensis* is classed as "Vulnerable",



and is on the IUCN's red list. There are just 5 700 individuals left in total, most of them living on the island of Komodo, which has led to the place being renamed the Isle of Dragons. However, that population is not sufficient to ensure the future of the species; there are not many females of egg-laying age left, and reproduction in captivity is difficult. In nature, the young are very vulnerable. It takes them three to five years to become adults. During all that time, they live mainly in trees, away



There are just 5 700 monitor lizards left in the wild in Indonesia.

The bite of the monitor lizard is often fatal to its prey, which succumb to septicæmia a few days later.

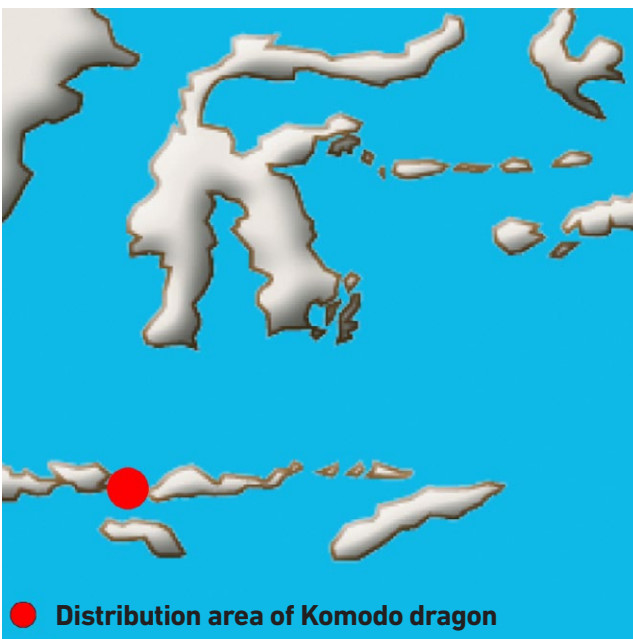


from the reach of predators, which can be other monitor lizards – older lizards do not hesitate to practice cannibalism on careless young. During its long life (it can live for up to 50 years), this



large reptile remains rather solitary, except during the mating season, when males do not hesitate to square up to one another in savage fashion, to conquer territory or to win over females. However, several threats cast shadows over the future of the monitor lizard, a species found nowhere else in the world. To begin with, its habitat, those volcanic islands set in hot regions, are ever more subject to colonisation by human activities. From dry meadowland to the savanna and on to the tropical forest, deforestation is gradually depriving it of its habitat, and poaching its favourite prey, especially deer, weighs down on its survival. Protected by law since 1930, the Komodo dragon is nonetheless essential for the local economy. Its impressive body and its aggressive nature mean

Conquering territory leads to violent combat between males.



The few inhabitants of Komodo Island live off tourism and handicrafts based on the emblematic Komodo dragon.

that tourists have a great liking for this dinosaur of modern times. For their part, the inhabitants of Komodo are enormously respectful of the monitor lizards, believing them to be reincarnations of dead people. The tradition was to offer them meat; being satisfied, they did not present a risk of attack.

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