

STARTING A COLLECTION

Some older gecko keepers had their interest kindled by finding a gecko in the wild and taking it home. This is no longer legal, as all of New Zealand's native lizards are now protected by law. Legal protection was introduced in 1981 for all but two species, the Common Gecko (*Woodworthia maculata*) and the Forest Gecko (*Mokopirirakau granulatus*). Protection for these species was enacted in 1996. Observation of geckos in the wild is permissible but any unauthorised handling of the animals or interference with their habitat is illegal.

New keepers must now obtain their founder stock from an existing breeder. Before obtaining stock, a permit must be applied for from the Department of Conservation. Advice on this aspect can be obtained from your local conservancy of the Department of Conservation, or the New Zealand Herpetological Society Inc. See the requirements on the DOC website.

Herpetoculturists may exchange captive bred stock amongst each other, but must keep full records of transfers. Breeders distributing surplus stock must ensure that recipients have a permit for the species involved.

Gecko keepers should from the outset give careful thought to the number of specimens they wish to keep. Careful study of geckos in captivity can be very rewarding, but if the collection is too large, there may be little time left after feeding and caring for the animals, to achieve very much in the way of serious study. Much depends on the circumstances of the individual keeper, and the amount of time available to devote to the hobby.

In my opinion, much more can be learned by keeping larger breeding groups than by keeping individual specimens, or pairs. More natural behaviour and interactions can be observed, and the larger number of offspring provide more realistic data for growth rate and development studies. I have seen many newcomers to the hobby discouraged when the offspring of a single pair die, whereas had a small breeding group been kept, then the larger number of offspring would in all likelihood have achieved a reasonable survival rate, and the percentage of losses would have been of lesser significance. Please remember that all populations, wild or captive, have a mortality rate, and geckos are no exception. Just because that prized specimen you just received suddenly and unexpectedly dies, doesn't mean you are an unfit keeper - unless of course such disasters become an everyday occurrence!

New keepers should get into the habit of keeping detailed records from the outset. Recording births, deaths and exchanges is a condition of the permit. There is however much more information which can be included, and which may well prove useful in expanding our rather limited knowledge of these interesting animals. Records can be kept in many ways. A diary of observations in an exercise book is useful for small collections, while those with a larger number of

animals may like to keep the basic data on a card system, with a separate book for observations. Those with computers may wish to keep their records in that way, which can certainly facilitate rapid retrieval of information when required. There are many relatively simple general purpose database programmes which can be readily adapted for use.