PRESERVING SPECIMENS

As well as keeping live geckos in captivity, herpetoculturists must be prepared to preserve any specimens which die. Under the requirements of the permits issued by the Department of Conservation, dead lizards should be lodged with specified educational institutions such as museums or universities; such specimens then become available for use by researchers. It is a pity that in the past much valuable material has been wasted due to the fact that herpetoculturists have not provided themselves with the basic requirements for the preservation of specimens.

The actual process of preservation is very simple. Small specimens can simply be immersed directly into the preserving solution, in a suitable glass container with a tight fitting stopper or screw cap. Containers can be purchased from suppliers of scientific glassware, or any small, clean household jars or bottles may be used. Plastic caps are ideal, but metal caps are less suitable and may corrode if used for long-term storage. For New Zealand geckos, commercial formalin is quite adequate as a preservative. This is supplied as a 40% solution, and should be further diluted to 10% (1 part formalin to 3 parts water). Green geckos, however, tend to lose their colour or turn pink in formalin. Commercial methylated spirits diluted by the addition of one part water to every five parts of spirits gives better retention, but may result in excessive hardening of the specimens. This can be prevented to some extent by the addition of a few drops of glycerine to the solution. Isopropanol can also be used. Ethanol is probably the best to use, but is difficult for the amateur keeper to obtain.

If the specimen is large and bulky, slits should be cut to allow the preservative to penetrate the abdominal cavity. Alternatively, if injection equipment is available, preservative can be introduced into the abdominal cavity, legs and tail in this way, with care being taken not to over-inflate and thus distort the specimen. If time permits, it is best to 'set' each specimen. This may be achieved by placing the animal in a natural position on paper towelling soaked in 10% formalin, in a deep tray. The specimen can be arranged to enable features to be easily studied e.g toes can be spread out and limbs tidily arranged. The specimen is then covered with more formalin soaked paper towelling, and left for twenty-four hours before being placed in the final preservative solution.

Labelling of preserved specimens should never be omitted. Labels identifying each specimen and giving its origin should be written in HB pencil on strong white paper. Where specimens are in individual containers, each label can be simply placed in the container with the appropriate specimen. Where several specimens are stored together in a large jar, labels should be attached to the appropriate specimens with s strong thread, using a sewing needle passed through the flesh and around a major bone, such as the fibula or the vertebral column.