

THAT FIRST IGUANA TRANSFER

By: John M. Woram

Elsewhere in this issue of *Noticias de Galápagos*, Dr. Linda Cayot describes the November 1991 repatriation of land iguanas to their ancestral home on Isla Baltra, where we may hope they will fare better than did their predecessors (Fig. 1). However, were it not for a little scientific serendipity that took place some 60 years ago, the recent repatriation would have been impossible. In 1932, G. Allan Hancock stopped at Isla Baltra—then known as South Seymour Island. If he hadn't done so, there would have been no iguanas available for repatriation last year.

The wealthy California industrialist had recently taken possession of his 195-foot *Velero III*, a brand new diesel-powered cruiser suitably appointed for the comfortable transport of its owner and guests on scientific expeditions in the Pacific. After a few shake-down cruises along the California coastline, *Velero III* was ready for its first full-scale Galápagos expedition. Captain Hancock had three collection projects in mind: he sought recent and fossil mollusks for the California Academy of Sciences, live vertebrates for

the San Diego Zoological Gardens, and fish for the Steinhart Aquarium.

In addition to his crew of about 20 officers and men, Captain Hancock invited seven scientists to join the expedition. Among their number were Mr. (now Dr.) John Garth and Drs. Edwin Palmer and C.B. ("Cy") Perkins. On subsequent voyages, George Hugh Banning, Waldo LaSalle Schmitt, and Harry Wegeforth joined the *Velero* party, and it is from their various diaries, memoirs, papers, and photographs that the first iguana transfer of 1932-33 is reconstructed here.

Thursday, 14 January 1932.—After an early-morning cruise past Guy Faulkes and the *Daphnes*, *Velero III* made a 0930 anchorage off South Seymour, also known then as iguana headquarters. Once on shore, John Garth spotted the first land iguana, which Dr. Palmer asked him to capture for the benefit of his movie camera. The job was done with such ease that Palmer (perhaps Galápagos' first film director) had him repeat the scene for the benefit of the production. Whatever satisfaction Garth may have

had with his bring-em-back-alive skills was short-lived: Cy Perkins pointed out that the catch of the moment was half-starved, and thus not up to the task of eluding its captor. This proved the case with most of the animals in the surrounding area. Perkins noted that all but a few were quite thin, and at least two were little more than living skeletons.

Soon enough the explorers found themselves in serious iguana country, with an animal basking under every second or third tree. When the few healthy ones were at last



Figure 1. November 1991—Déjà vu? National Park Warden Cirilo Barrera escorts the descendents of the Hancock transfer across Itabaca Channel, on their way back "home" to South Seymour Island—better known today as Isla Baltra (photograph courtesy of Roger Torda).

discovered, they more than made up for the lethargy of their frail brothers and sisters. Nevertheless, by day's end about 15 reasonably healthy specimens had been collected for the zoo.

Saturday, 16 January.—On visiting North Seymour Island, Garth thought the terrain appeared more favorable for iguanas than on South Seymour, yet not one could be found here. And this gave Captain Hancock an idea. Today the same idea would get him tossed off the Island, but if it hadn't occurred to him then, there would be nothing to write about now. For better or for worse, the Captain's idea was to capture 20 or so land iguanas on South Seymour and release them on North Seymour. Then he would come back in a year or so to see what happened to them. "A good idea I believe. No harm anyhow, as far as I can see," wrote Perkins in his diary entry for this day. And so it was decided.

Sunday, 17 January.—Notwithstanding the usual Sabbath observances on board *Velero*, a 17-man landing party was dispatched to the north end of South Seymour to round up about 40 more iguanas. The afternoon release of the animals on North Seymour was as well recorded as any Hollywood opening, with both motion-picture and still-camera coverage (Fig. 2). Nevertheless, the stars of the day did not much care for their spotlight, and many needed a gentle prodding to induce some motion for the cameras. Once coaxed out of the transport cage, the saurian celebrities ignored their admiring public and beat a hasty retreat to shelter under the nearby cactus plants.

Monday, 18 January.—Cy Perkins went back to South Seymour to catch another six iguanas, taking his pick from among the dozens of candidates he saw there. This part of the catch was destined for San Diego, and quickly adjusted to a diet of shipboard delicacies, including cabbage and raisin nut bread.

Velero III departed South Seymour the following morning, and after several more weeks of exploration, returned home on 27 February 1932. Before the end of the same year, Allan Hancock was ready to take *Velero III* back to Galápagos, and to look in on the newly tenanted North Seymour.

The second voyage of the *Velero III* began on 29 December, and after a lengthy cruise along the Central and South American coasts, reached Galápagos on 24 January. On arriving at North Seymour a few weeks later, writer George Hugh Banning expressed



Figure 2. 17 January 1932—Captain Allan Hancock (left) supervises the release of the land iguanas on North Seymour Island. The crew member holding the cage is unidentified (photograph courtesy of the Allan Hancock Foundation).

some reservations on what had taken place here the previous year. "The practice, and, especially, the irresponsible practice, of rearranging the island fauna, might lead the investigations of others somewhat afield. Hear ye, therefore, and be it known nevertheless, that some seventy iguanas (*C. subscristatus* [sic]), including a second transport, have been carried across the channel from the southern to the northern Seymour, investigations having shown to our utmost satisfaction that the emigrants of last year were still there and doing splendidly." Banning's "second transport" referred to an 18 February 1933 transfer of another 26 iguanas between the two Seymours. The animals were collected in the morning by Drs. Perkins and Harry Wegeforth, and brought to their new home later the same day. In a hasty North Seymour reconnaissance, John Garth saw about six of last year's iguanas, all apparently well adjusted to their new home.

The third cruise of the *Velero III* brought the Hancock party back to Galápagos, and to North Seymour on 22 January 1934, where Garth recorded seeing numerous iguana burrows, though the animals them-

selves kept out of sight (fearing perhaps yet another ride in a cage?). On this trip, Dr. Palmer recalled that "We had removed to North Seymour 72 land iguanas in 1932 for lack of food, but today the vegetation [on South Seymour] was very fair and there seemed to be no dearth of iguanas of which we took many pictures, and several were taken for mounting." It is tempting to speculate that if this had been Captain Hancock's first encounter with the iguanas of Seymour, it might not have occurred to him to intercede in their affairs, and our story might have ended on a much sadder note.

Again in 1934, December 13th saw the *Velero III* back at North Seymour for another site inspection. The event was somewhat overshadowed by their visit a few weeks earlier (2-3 December 1933) to the hastily christened "Dead Man's Beach" on Isla Marchena, where the Hancock team found and photographed the remains of Rudolf Lorenz and Trygve Nuggerud.

But to return to happier circumstances, once on North Seymour Captain Hancock went off scouting for his charges, finding two in excellent condition, an old egg, and an Island generally honeycombed with fresh burrows. From all evidence, it was judged that the colonists were doing quite well. And the rest, as they say, is history.

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