

Komodo dragon attacks terrorize Indonesia villages

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In this photo taken on April 28, 2009, a Komodo dragon moves out of a toilet at a visitor center on Rinca island, Indonesia. Attacks on humans by Komodo dragons _ said to number at around 2,500 in the wild _ are rare, but seem to have increased in recent years. Komodo dragons have a fearsome reputation worldwide because their shark-like teeth and poisonous saliva can kill a person within days of a bite. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)

(AP) -- Komodo dragons have shark-like teeth and poisonous venom that can kill a person within hours of a bite. Yet villagers who have lived for generations alongside the world's largest lizard were not afraid - until the dragons started to attack.

The stories spread quickly across this smattering of tropical islands in southeastern Indonesia, the only place the endangered reptiles can still be found in the wild: Two people were killed since 2007 - a young boy and a fisherman - and others were badly wounded after being charged unprovoked.

Komodo dragon attacks are still rare, experts note. But fear is swirling through the fishing villages, along with questions on how best to live with the dragons in the future.

Main, a 46-year-old park ranger, was doing paperwork when a dragon slithered up the stairs of his wooden hut in Komodo National Park and went for his ankles dangling beneath the desk. When the ranger tried to pry open the beast's powerful [jaws](#), it locked its teeth into his hand.

"I thought I wouldn't survive... I've spent half my life working with Komodos and have never seen anything like it," said Main, pointing to his jagged gashes, sewn up with 55 stitches and still swollen three months later. "Luckily, my friends heard my screams and got me to hospital in time."

Komodos, which are popular at zoos in the United States to Europe, grow to be 10 feet (3 meters) long and 150 pounds (70 kilograms). All of the estimated 2,500 left in the wild can be found within the 700-square-mile (1,810-square-kilometer) Komodo National Park, mostly on its two largest islands, Komodo and Rinca. The lizards on neighboring Padar were wiped out in the 1980s when hunters killed their main prey, deer.

Though poaching is illegal, the sheer size of the park - and a shortage of rangers - makes it almost impossible to patrol, said Heru Rudiharto, a biologist and reptile expert. Villagers say the dragons are hungry and more aggressive toward humans because their food is being poached, though park officials are quick to disagree.

The giant lizards have always been dangerous, said Rudiharto. However tame they may appear, lounging beneath trees and gazing at the sea from white-sand beaches, they are fast, strong and deadly.

The animals are believed to have descended from a larger lizard on Indonesia's main island Java or Australia around 30,000 years ago. They can reach speeds of up to 18 miles (nearly 30 kilometers) per hour, their legs winding around their low, square shoulders like egg beaters.

When they catch their prey, they carry out a frenzied biting spree that releases venom, according to a new study this month in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The authors, who used surgically excised glands from a terminally ill dragon at the Singapore Zoo, dismissed the theory that prey die from blood poisoning caused by toxic bacteria in the lizard's mouth.

"The long, jaded teeth are the primary weapons. They deliver these deep, deep wounds," said Bryan Fry of the University of Melbourne. "But the venom keeps it bleeding and further lowers the blood pressure, thus bringing the animal closer to unconsciousness."

Four people have been killed in the last 35 years (2009, 2007, 2000 and 1974) and at least eight injured in just over a decade. But park officials say these numbers aren't overly alarming given the steady stream of tourists and the 4,000 people who live in their midst.

"Any time there's an attack, it gets a lot of attention," Rudiharto said. "But that's just because this lizard is exotic, archaic, and can't be found anywhere but here."

Still, the recent attacks couldn't have come at a worse time.

The government is campaigning hard to get the park onto a new list of

the Seven Wonders of Nature - a long shot, but an attempt to at least raise awareness. The park's rugged hills and savannahs are home to orange-footed scrub fowl, wild boar and small wild horses, and the surrounding coral reefs and bays harbor more than a dozen whale species, dolphins and sea turtles.

Claudio Ciofi, who works at the Department of Animal Biology and Genetics at the University of Florence in Italy, said if komodos are hungry, they may be attracted to villages by the smell of drying fish and cooking, and "encounters can become more frequent."

Villagers wish they knew the answer.

They say they've always lived peacefully with Komodos. A popular traditional legend tells of a man who once married a dragon "princess." Their twins, a human boy, Gerong, and a lizard girl, Orah, were separated at birth.

When Gerong grew up, the story goes, he met a fierce-looking beast in the forest. But just as he was about to spear it, his mother appeared, revealing to him that the two were brother and sister.

"How could the dragons get so aggressive?" Hajj Amin, 51, taking long slow drags off his clove cigarettes, as other village elders gathering beneath a wooden house on stilts nodded. Several dragons lingered nearby, drawn by the rancid smell of fish drying on bamboo mats beneath the blazing sun. Also strolling by were dozens of goats and chickens.

"They never used to attack us when we walked alone in the forest, or attack our children," Amin said. "We're all really worried about this."

The dragons eat 80 percent of their weight and then go without food for

several weeks. Amin and others say the dragons are hungry partly because of a 1994 policy that prohibits villagers from feeding them.

"We used to give them the bones and skin of deer," said the fisherman.

Villagers recently sought permission to feed wild boar to the Komodos several times a year, but park officials say that won't happen.

"If we let people feed them, they will just get lazy and lose their ability to hunt," said Jeri Imansyah, another [reptile](#) expert. "One day, that will kill them. "

The attack that first put villagers on alert occurred two years ago, when 8-year-old Mansyur was mauled to death while defecating in the bushes behind his wooden hut.

People have since asked for a 6-foot-high (2-meter) concrete wall to be built around their villages, but that idea, too, has been rejected. The head of the park, Tamen Sitorus, said: "It's a strange request. You can't build a fence like that inside a national park!"

Residents have made a makeshift barrier out of trees and broken branches, but they complain it's too easy for the animals to break through.

"We're so afraid now," said 11-year-old Riswan, recalling how just a few weeks ago students screamed when they spotted one of the giant lizards in a dusty field behind their school. "We thought it was going to get into our classroom. Eventually we were able to chase it up a hill by throwing rocks and yelling 'Hooohh Hooohh.'"

Then, just two months ago, 31-year-old fisherman Muhamad Anwar was killed when he stepped on a lizard in the grass as he was heading to a

field to pick fruit from a sugar tree.

Even park rangers are nervous.

Gone are the days of goofing around with the lizards, poking their tails, hugging their backs and running in front of them, pretending they're being chased, said Muhamad Saleh, who has worked with the animals since 1987.

"Not any more," he says, carrying a 6-foot-long (2-meter) stick wherever he goes for protection. Then, repeating a famous line by Indonesia's most renowned poet, he adds: "I want to live for another thousand of years."

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