



Naga, a Komodo dragon captured on an island in Indonesia, makes himself at home at Lowry Park Zoo. The 9-foot lizard is on loan from the Cincinnati Zoo. Researchers are looking into what substance keeps the dragons from being poisoned by their own toxic, bacteria-laden saliva. A synthetic form of the substance may be used someday to help people.

TODD L. CHAPPEL/Tribune photos

day of the

DRAGON

At first glance, this rare visitor at Lowry Park Zoo is a frightening site. But to its owner, it's his "boy."

By NANETTE WOITAS
Tribune Staff Writer

For Johnny Arnett, man's best friend isn't a dog. It's a dragon.

The Cincinnati Zoo supervisor recently bid farewell to his best buddy, Naga, a 9-foot-long lizard with razor-sharp teeth and a lethal bite. The rare Komodo dragon is on display at Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo until May 31.

Lowry officials have struck a deal to buy two young dragons from Cincinnati after Naga goes home. The zoo needs \$50,000 for the purchase and \$150,000 to build a home for the animals, said Lowry

development director Bob Elek.

Meanwhile, zoo visitors can catch a glimpse of the Komodo dragon by visiting Naga, sire of 32 of the 55 captive dragons in zoos in the United States.

The endangered Komodo dragons number about 2,000 to 3,000 on the remote islands of Indonesia. The animals have no natural predators and feed on anything they find, living or dead — often other dragons.

The cunning hunters hide in tall grass near well-used paths on the islands and ambush their prey. Often they disembowel their victims and begin eating right away. Sometimes they have to wait for the rapidly reproducing bacteria in



Cincinnati Zoo supervisor Johnny Arnett makes sure his Komodo dragon is happy in his temporary Tampa home.

their slobbering bites to kill the wounded animal within 72 hours. Then they track the dying animal and dine when it dies.

Naga was captured when he began threatening a village, said Arnett, who has traveled to the dragon's home twice since December. Arnett has been helping Fort Worth entrepreneur Terry Fredeking, owner of Antibody Systems Inc., in his quest to make a lifesaving drug by studying the dragons' saliva.

Fredeking has spent about \$75,000 over 2½ years trying to determine what substance keeps dragons from being poisoned by their own toxic, bacteria-laden saliva. If Fredeking can do that, the drug companies plan to reproduce the substance to help save the lives of about 400,000 Americans who die each year from a bacterial blood

disease called septicemia.

Reports of dragons eating people or inflicting deadly bites are sketchy. Arnett's sources attribute at least 24 deaths to dragons over the past decade.

Arnett and Fredeking paused a moment last month at a monument on the island of Flores, near Komodo, to honor a Swiss researcher believed to have been eaten there by the dragons he was studying.

Because the man-eating lizards are considered a national treasure, they aren't killed when they terrorize or eat humans, the men said.

Naga almost seems to enjoy the attention he's receiving at the zoo. He stalks through his enclosure, climbing rocks, hurling his

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Man opens nature's medicine cabinet

By NANETTE WOITAS
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TAMPA — Entrepreneur Terry Fredeking gives new meaning to the words "wild about science."

He has plucked parasites from the backs of the fierce Tasmanian devils in the hopes of using the pests to develop a new painkiller for arthritis sufferers.

He has sucked out syringes full of saliva from vampire bats in the hopes of copying a substance that could be used to produce plasma, which dissolves blood clots.

He has crawled across a desert with tweezers collecting 10,000 black widow spiders to help the Merck drug company develop anti-venom serum for the arachnid's lethal bite.

He has used a turn-of-the-century map borrowed from the Smithsonian Institution to lead him to the lair of giant Amazon leeches. He pried the leeches from the back of a 13-foot anaconda snake.

Drug companies believe the leeches' saliva holds the key needed to produce a powerful new anti-coagulant, a drug needed by heart-attack sufferers.

Fredeking is a pioneer, an adventurer in the name of science. His studies have helped turn some of nature's most unusual substances into drugs that may be used to save human lives.

Fredeking, 49, spends most of

his time running Antibody Systems Inc., his Fort Worth, Texas, company that tests vaccines for drug companies.

But his favorite projects take him to the world's deepest jungles in search of some of the planet's deadliest animals.

His current project has sent him scurrying out of the way of wild Komodo dragons. By testing the dragons' saliva, skin and blood, Fredeking hopes to help a drug company find a way to prevent or cure septicemia, a deadly infection that poisons the blood and kills about 400,000 Americans each year.

San Diego-based Corvas International Inc. is eager to see what Fredeking finds by swabbing the mouths of the dangerous lizards. Over the past few years, he has supplied them with "several strange organisms" used to develop treatments, said George Vlasuk, vice president of biological research.

Fredeking's most-recent work for Corvas included gathering hookworms. The company is working now to use the worms to develop a blood-clotting medication.

Vlasuk said he didn't know where he would turn for such creatures if it weren't for Fredeking.

"He's pretty unique," Vlasuk said with a wry chuckle. "I don't think I'd deal with anybody else, even if there was someone else. He gets what he says he's gonna get."

Komodo dragon can look intimidating

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200-pound body over a craggy stream and digging in the cool dirt with his powerful claws and forearms.

"If I saw him in the wild, I wouldn't run, I'd just drop dead," said zoo visitor Myra Scott McNary, a Pinellas County judge.

Arnett is frustrated that dragons don't benefit from the same save-the-species crusades backing preservation of more friendly looking animals, such as giant pandas and dolphins.

"How do you get people to save

a big, ugly lizard?" he shrugs. "It's damn hard."

Naga came to the United States about six years ago as a gift from the Indonesian president to then-President Bush. Arnett has cared for him ever since.

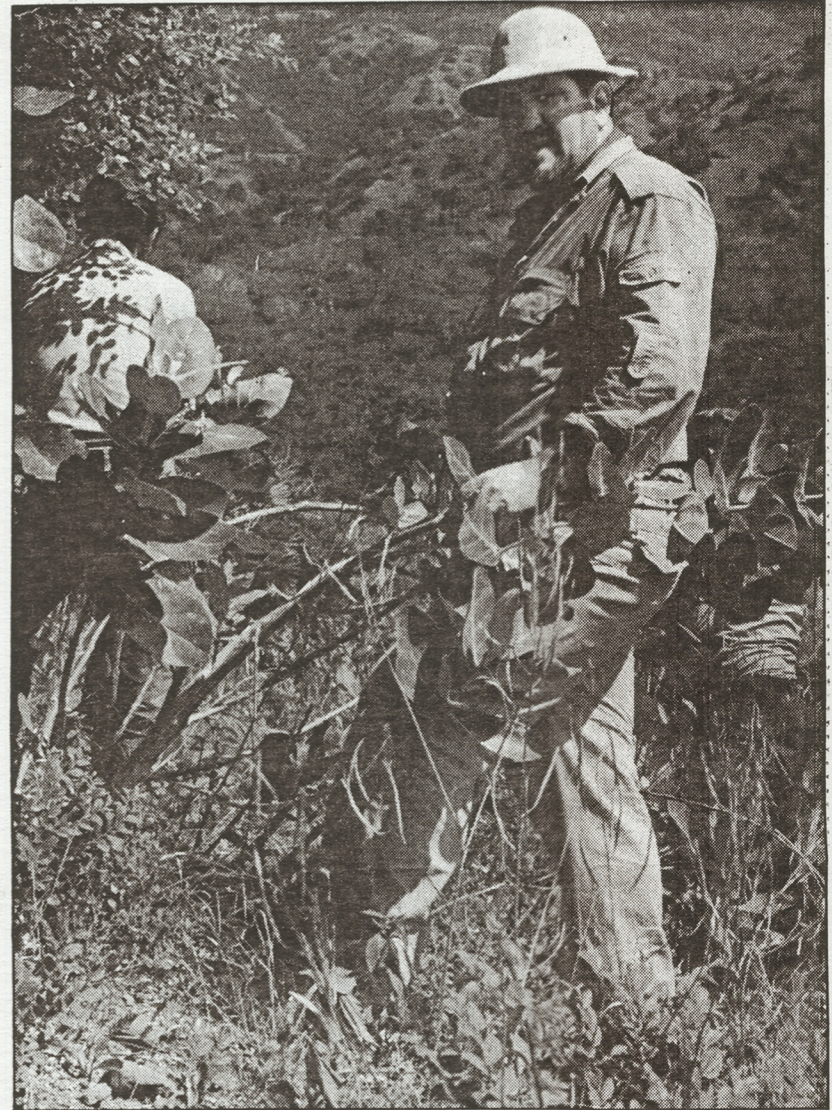
"I could very easily walk that animal around the zoo on a leash, but it's not a safe thing to do," Arnett says. "He's not a bad lizard. He's a very smart animal. I compare him to the velociraptor in the movie 'Jurassic Park.' The only thing he hasn't done yet is open doors."

Wild dragons are so smart, they rapidly dig tunnels and escape underground when fires frequently roar across their island homes. They also dig burrows to escape the summer heat, when ground temperatures may reach 150 degrees, Arnett said.

Arnett has never owned a dog. The supervisor over some of Cincinnati's most feared and spine-chilling inhabitants — the reptiles, amphibians and fish — admits he fears the common canine.

But not Naga. Arnett misses the 9-foot killer so much, he calls the zoo daily to make sure everything's all right.

"He's changed my life," he said recently, glancing affectionately at the scaly giant who comes when he's called. "It's like leaving a new babysitter with your kids. He's my boy."



Entrepreneur Terry Fredeking travels to the world's deepest jungles in search of some of the planet's deadliest animals. There he seeks to capture the cure for many diseases that ails humans. In his current project for his company Antibody Systems Inc., Fredeking is testing the Komodo dragon's toxic saliva in hopes of preventing septicemia, a disease that kills 400,000 Americans a year.