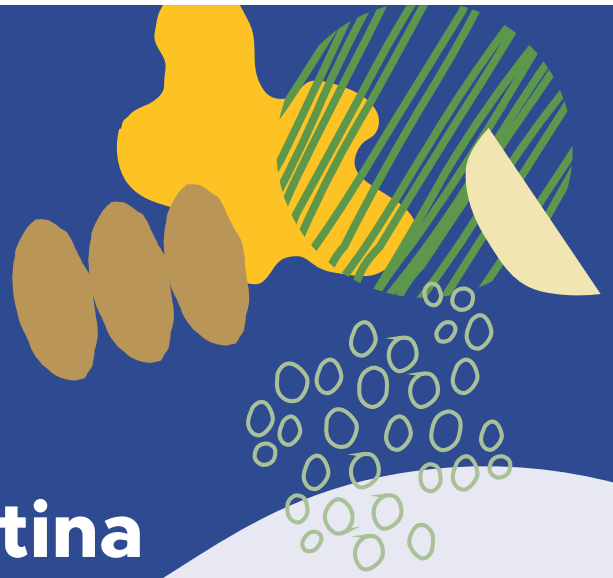




CITES & LIVELIHOODS CASE STUDY 2022

Harvest and trade of tegu lizards in Argentina



A family from northeastern Argentina pose with their day's catch of red tegu. **Photo:** Gustavo Porini.

SPECIES, USE AND TRADE

The Black and White Tegu (*Salvator merianae*) and the Red Tegu (*Salvator rufescens*) are harvested in Argentina for their skins, meat, medicinal value, and to a lesser degree for the pet trade.

Both species are widespread habitat and dietary generalists found in Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay. *S. merianae* also occurs in Uruguay. There are no estimates of population sizes but both species are considered common in a wide range of habitats, including degraded and human dominated environments such as farmland and road verges. *S. merianae* has been assessed on the IUCN Red List as Least Concern while *S. rufescens* has not been assessed. Tegus were listed in CITES appendix II in 1977, primarily due to high levels of trade in skins at that time.

The traditional harvest system consists of hunters using dogs to track tegus to their burrows. The main focus is on the capture of mature individuals for their skins although eggs and/or hatchlings are occasionally collected for the pet trade. Hunters may sell skins directly to tanneries but more often the skins pass through intermediaries, who then re-sell the skins to tanneries. Tegus have been commercially harvested for over half a century. Between 1941 and 1998, almost 31 million skins were exported from Argentina and during the 1980s, global trade averaged 1.9 million skins per year. Tegu skins are mostly used for the manufacture of small leather goods such as boots and watch straps. Since the peaks of the 1980s trade in skins has decreased by over 90% due to declining international demand.



ARGENTINA



BLACK AND WHITE TEGU (*Salvator merianae*), RED TEGU (*Salvator rufescens*)



APPENDIX II



BLACK AND WHITE TEGU – LEAST CONCERN, RED TEGU – NOT ASSESSED



Adult male red tegu, Argentina. **Photo:** Mariano Barros

LIVELIHOOD BENEFITS

In Argentina, wages in rural areas are often less than US\$ 5/ day, unemployment is common, and many rural communities depend heavily on natural resources. The tegu harvest represents an accessible source of income for indigenous communities and the rural poor. Tegu meat – a by-product of the trade in skins - is high in protein and low in saturated fats, and represents a valuable source of food for nutrient deficient diets. Tegu fat is widely valued for traditional medicinal purposes and is traded locally. In 2002, Argentina began a process of macroeconomic structural reform and the ensuing social turmoil plunged many communities into a state of extreme poverty. Further disruptions such as the 2008 financial crisis, extreme weather events linked to climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated economic and socio-cultural challenges. Evidence suggests the tegu harvest contributes towards safeguarding local livelihoods during such periods of volatility.

CONSERVATION IMPACTS

The multi-stakeholder Tupinambis Commission is the official body responsible for controlling the tegu trade in Argentina. The harvest is managed by means of monitoring offtake at strategic points in the supply chain (e.g., collection points and tanneries). The recording of skin quantities and sizes began in 1992 and remains a cornerstone of the management programme since skin size is a reasonable indicator of age and reproductive status. Size restrictions have been implemented to limit the offtake of juvenile and sub-adult animals. Long term trade monitoring has revealed no evidence of tegu population declines, even when trade was at its peak in the 1980s. Tegus possess a life history strategy that makes them resilient to overharvest, characterized by relatively large clutch sizes, onset of maturity in 3 to 4 years, and a lifespan of 10 years or more. Habitat loss due to the rapid expansion of agriculture is considered the most important conservation threat facing both species.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The legal trade in tegu skins is thought to be a significant deterrent to the emergence of an illegal trade as a result of CITES management regulations and corporate governance checks. The CITES requirement for ongoing monitoring of harvested populations has facilitated the collection of robust longitudinal data and the necessary scientific evidence to demonstrate the sustainability of commercial harvest and trade. A rudimentary harvest monitoring approach has proved adequate to date as the primary management tool. If trade volumes were to increase, this system may need augmentation.

The tegu harvest programme may benefit from more detailed multidisciplinary research. For example, the broader impact of the national and international tegu trade on livelihood resilience and environmental change warrants further research, especially in regards to growing demands for high quality protein and global challenges (e.g., zoonotic diseases, climate change). CITES could be instrumental in catalyzing research and development initiatives to ensure optimal ecological, social and cultural outcomes.



Above: Tegu skins are stretched, and sun dried before sale.

Photo: Gustavo Porini.

Right: Ecological small trawl building with turtle excluder device San Felipe workshop

Photo: credit Pesca ABC.



Figure: Trends in tegu skin exports from Argentina (source CITES Trade Database)

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IN COLLABORATION WITH:



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