



## Reptiles at Haġar Qim

■ I read with interest Linda Downing's letter ('Selmunett lizard at Haġar Qim', *The Sunday Times*, July 11) and comments on it on the newspaper's website, and I would like to clear a number of misconceptions.

First of all, no one declared that the fresh Maltese crab is extinct, as Ms Downing claims. It may be rare, restricted or even endangered but is definitely not extinct. Only scientific studies can ensure the real status of the species, and till now I am not aware of any being published.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Selmunett Wall Lizard, at least in its natural habitat. I must agree with an online comment that lizards are absent from the northeast of Malta.

Technically, it is absent from Zurrieq coast up to Ċirkewwa, excluding two recently introduced populations. Full studies on this status are still under study but this monitoring has been carried out since 1998.

The online comment about seeing lizards at Haġar Qim might be correct, as I know that locals have done their best to

introduce this lizard illegally in this location although all efforts, when I last visited (late 2008), had failed.

Regarding the description of the lizard, it hardly fits that of a wall lizard. The sighting was either an Ocellated Skink or, judging from the limb description, a Moorish or Turkish gecko. Western-Whip, Leopard snakes and the chameleon were also recorded from this locality.

A note must be made though on the coloration of the Maltese Wall Lizard. The naming of several sub-species is today invalid as we have five sub-species named from 17 definite separate populations (including those of the Pelagian islands) that I am aware of and are based only on morphological grounds (appearance).

If we place each population as a sub-species because of its coloration then we need to have 17 sub-species not five, because they all have their unique coloration.

Besides, large islands like Malta have a separate population within themselves and variations are more common within individuals than those of smaller islands and islets.

A study I published in 2007 clearly shows that coastal lizards vary from mainland lizards and although I hope that a population of Selmunett lizards still exists somewhere, even by human intervention, this is highly unlikely.

I must point out though that lizards from the Paola/Tarxien area are the specimens that most closely resemble the Selmunett lizard but are not identical.

Besides, males and females also differ greatly from each other and the same individual differs in coloration but not in patterns, even within seasons.

Only by molecular studies, currently being carried out, can we tell how one population is genetically variable from another and then we clearly distinguish their taxonomic rank.

Today, by human intervention and carelessness, everything is possible but what I suggested is the most reasonable. I hope that future recordings of sightings are supplied by photography or specimens, unless a permit is also required.

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*Paola*