

A gecko hoax that refuses to go away

KOTA KINABALU: Everybody is talking about the 'tekek', a large species of a gecko that inhabits forests and man-made buildings in villages.

The animal has become so famous; its story reaching almost everybody in the State, accelerated by the new technology in communications.

"Nobody paid any attention to this gecko before. But it now has a price of RM1million for any specimen that is heavier than 300g.

"In fact a man was killed in Lahad Datu for reasons allegedly related to the selling of 'tekek'. This should not have happened," said Director of the Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Assoc. Prof Dr Abdul Hamid Ahmad.

He said that he has tried on numerous occasions to explain the real facts about rumours and purported medicinal values of the 'tekek' but all have fallen on deaf ears.

According to Dr Abdul Hamid, there are two issues here contributing to a terrible hoax that just refuses to go away.

Firstly, he said, after the purported 'facts' surfaced, buyers scrambled to get the gecko and are willing to bid up to RM1million for each kilogram of the tekek.



Dr Abdul Hamid

"Secondly, people do not hesitate to believe this and go gecko hunting and still are as you read this article. It has to stop. People will definitely do better by keeping chicken, duck, goat or pig. Let me tell you why.

"The 'facts': tekek can cure HIV-AIDS; this was proven by some Japanese scientists. Because of this, tekek is now so much sought after and the demand is so high, for a simple reason that HIV-AIDS has no other cure. But one has to be careful handling a tekek - it is very poisonous and a bite is able to kill or paralyze the victim. So they were told," he stressed.

Dr Abdul Hamid stressed that what have been told are not facts and before adding, "but these are.

"In science, this the tokay gecko (*Gekko gecko* Linn. 1758), which is distributed well between South Asia in

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the west through Southeast Asia, to New Guinea in the east. Tekek cannot and will not cure HIV-AIDS.

"There is no scientific proof relating to this and one or a group of scientists from Japan have never been engaged in tekek-related research on HIV-AIDS. Even if one tried to google the Internet for any link to any scientific publication to that effect, one would definitely be frustrated," he said.

According to him, Gekkonid lizards, like many other animals, have been used in Chinese traditional medicine and still are.

The 'Tekek' is indeed one of the largest geckoes in the world, a second largest species that grows up to 35cm and weighs up to 300g. Most individuals in this species are of small to moderate size with males being larger than females, he said.

However, one rarely sees a specimen of 35cm or one that weights 300g - forget

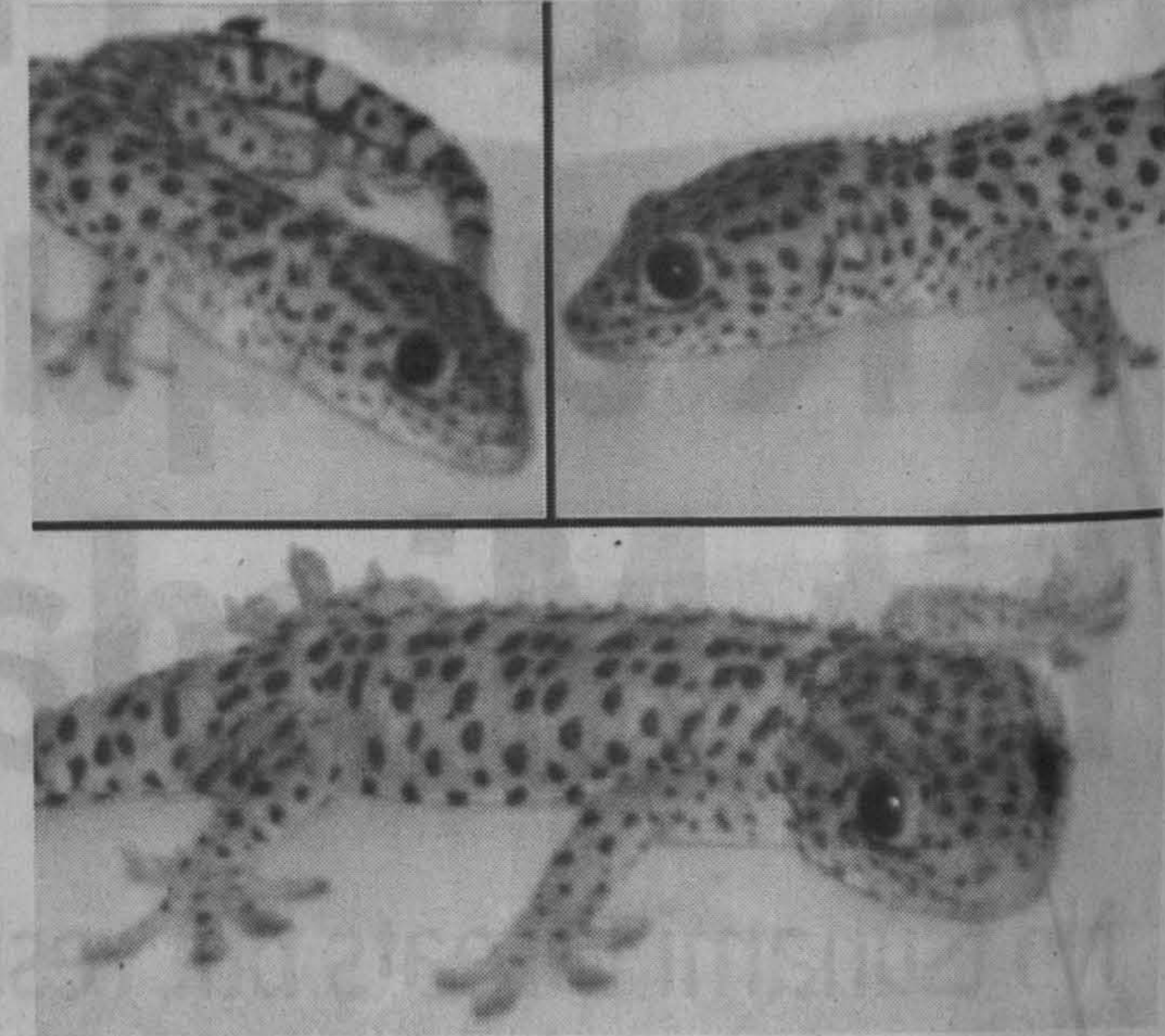
about 60kg!. The species is not new to science; it is the first gecko species described by Linnaeus in 1758!," he pointed out.

Between the first tekek that formed the description of the species more than 250 years ago, many tekek were captured, identified, measured and either released or became specimens in collection museums throughout the world.

Dr Abdul Hamid also disclosed that the gecko is not poisonous as it does not have venom glands - but any tekek will bite once captured.

Because it preys on insects and smaller vertebrates, it has an amazingly powerful muscle for its jaws. Therefore, a tekek bite can be very painful and might inflict minor cuts to the skin. Rats and bird chicks in nests are amongst its food items.

There is no record of anybody being killed or made paralyzed from a tekek bite and nobody will ever



The 'tekek', a large species of a gecko that inhabits forests and man-made buildings in villages.

be, he stressed.

"So, where did our people learn about the amazing facts that were unknown before? Well, it has to have been started by somebody for reasons we cannot fathom. Certainly a lot of people who buy this tekek story are careless and given half a chance, take it into faith something that is just too good to be true.

"As it is now, the story is just a baloney sugarcoated with scientific flowers. This is called pseudoscience - a science that is not. Tekek hunters travel extensively, sometimes illegally, using

department's vehicles, moonlighting under the disguise of working off in the fields.

"The terrible deaths of many geckoes and the likes due to wrong identification, wrong size, or improper keeping is also a disaster to biodiversity we are so proud of. I have seen a man keeping several tekek in a cage fed with plain rice!.

This is an attrition that will bleed our time and money until a date when everybody will realize that it is just a plain, laughable but also a terrible hoax, he said.