



Husab's Dashing Dasher

Husab is known as the mountainous setting of the majestic landscape behind the Great Welwitschia. Few may know that Husab is home to an unusual creature with scaly copper-tinted spectacles, petite black-and-white ear shields, pastel-spotted body, pink derriere, extraordinary long orange tail, and a ready disposition for racing at lightning speed over rocky slopes: the Husab Sand Lizard, *Pedioplanis husabensis*. Only nimble and persistent observers can come close enough to admire the beauty of this dashing dasher.

As every Namib toktokkie knows, each place in the desert differs in terms of its resources and who can live there. In order to exist in the unforgiving desert, some creatures have become very good at finding particular, suitable conditions even if these prevail in only very specific locations. For these creatures, the universe is small and their fate is connected to that of their micro-universe.

Pedioplanis husabensis is an inhabitant of pied mountain slopes in the Central Namib. Light rocks reflect the sun and remain relatively cool, and dark rocks absorb the sun and get hot. By moving between black and white rocks, lizards can heat up and cool down, speed up and recover. They may also find more variety of food on different kinds of rocks. They may need particular conditions of light-dark habitats to breed successfully. Also, these habitats may somehow allow them to escape from predators or to avoid competition with the more wide-spread Northern Plains Sand Lizard, which inhabits less patchy stony areas.

What restricts Husab Sand Lizards to the particular habitats they are found in? What limits their distribution to the area between Husab, Moonlandscape, Rössing, Valencia and Langer Heinrich? Although not known to associate with uranium, why should this species' total range coincide with the location of no less than five (potential) uranium mines in a triangle with sides of 50 km? If one didn't know better, one would think this lizard sprouts uranium mines like mushrooms.

Scientists admit that they do not have the answers to the above because nobody has, until now, found out any more than what the lizard looks like, roughly where it occurs, and how it is related to other lizards. With support from the mining sector as well as independent research funding, a multinational team of scientists, including Namibians, is currently tackling the important task of getting to grips with the population genetics, ecology and natural history (the so-called "vital statistics") of *Pedioplanis husabensis*. The plight of this lizard was exposed through a succession of Environmental Impact Assessments at various mines, and it is laudable that research is now being conducted to fill the knowledge gap so as to make it possible to come up with a viable management plan to ensure the future of this vulnerable species. Watch this space for more on Moralesi's lizard friend.

Zophosis moralesi quips that such biological research is a critical component of responsible mining as it is a bold and conscientious way for mines to avoid undermining themselves.

EnviroMEND: joh.henschel@mweb.com.na