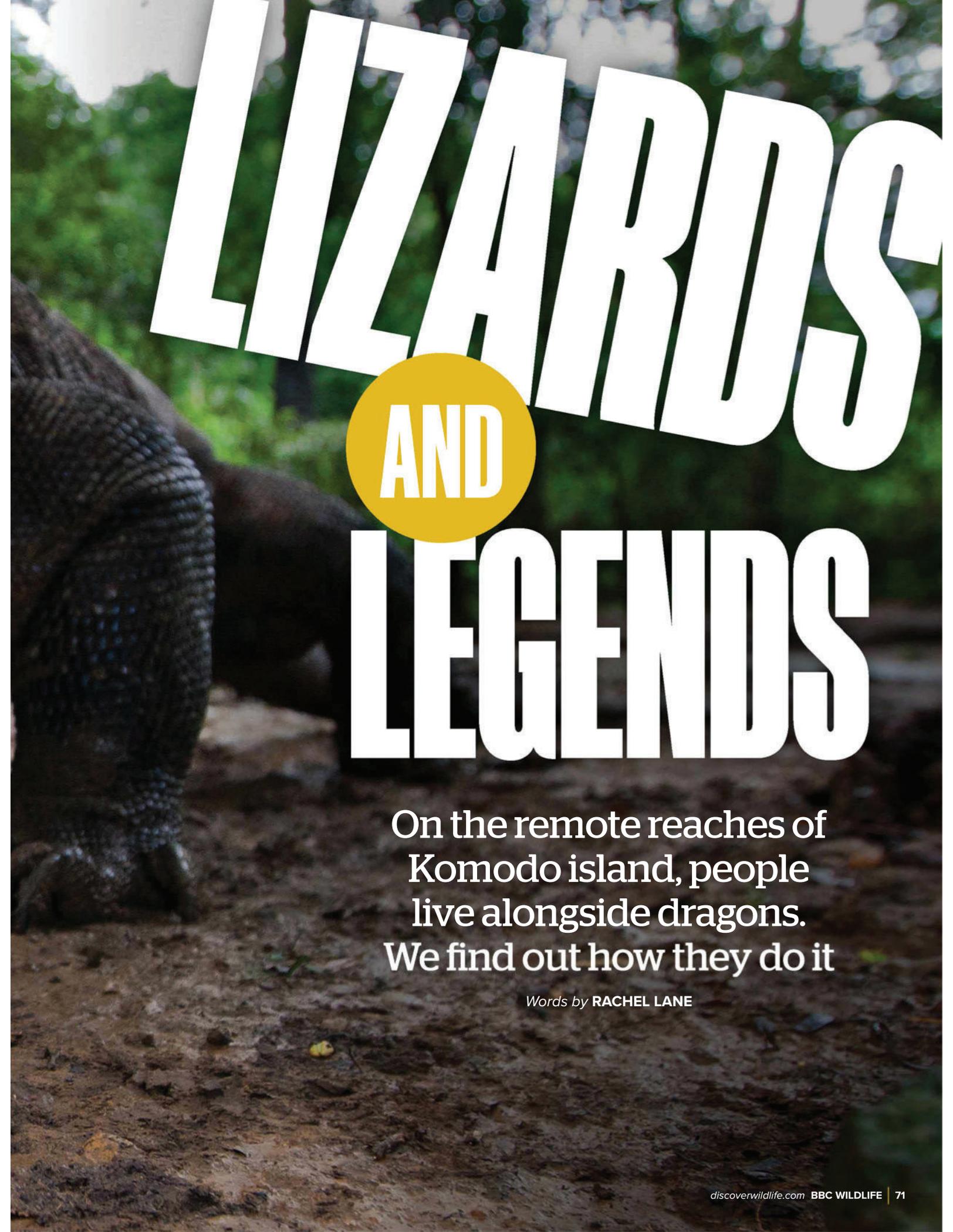


● KOMODO DRAGONS

These huge lizards are found on Komodo and a few of the nearby Lesser Sunda islands



LIZARDS AND LEGENDS

On the remote reaches of
Komodo island, people
live alongside dragons.
We find out how they do it

Words by RACHEL LANE

A male Komodo dragon runs along the shore in Komodo National Park



NESTLED IN THE HEART of the Indonesian archipelago, Komodo island is a small but extraordinary landmass reminiscent of something out of *Jurassic Park*. A sanctuary for the largest

extant lizard species, the endangered Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*), it offers a glimpse into an era dominated by reptiles.

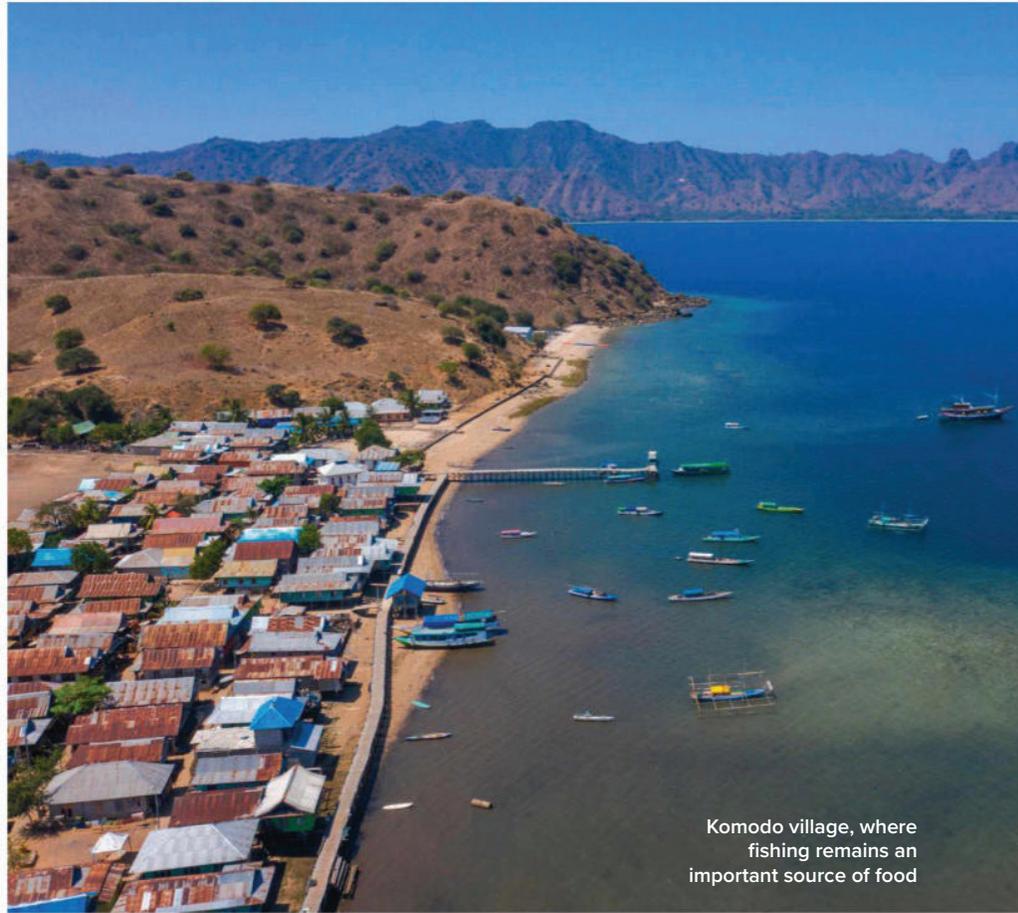
Komodo is not only a haven for more than 5,000 Komodo dragons, a species found nowhere else in the world, it's also been the ancestral home of the Ata Modo people for some 2,000 years. The Ata Modo boast a rich history and culture, skilfully adapting their ways of life to coexist with their enormous reptilian neighbours. Yet, despite their contribution to Komodo dragon conservation, Ata Modo culture and history have scarcely been documented.

Friends say I have a knack for never taking no for an answer. This apparent flaw fuelled my quest to uncover the Ata Modo's

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rachel Lane is a PhD student from Texas, USA, specialising in the human dimensions of wildlife. She explores how communities around the world navigate life alongside animals.



Komodo village, where fishing remains an important source of food

“Within moments of arriving in Komodo, I stared in disbelief as a dragon dashed across a playing field”

mysteries. They are given barely a mention on Wikipedia, and it became apparent that the only reasonable course of action would be to pack my bags and set off for Indonesia.

WITHIN MOMENTS OF arriving in Komodo village, I stared in disbelief as a dragon dashed across a school playing field where, hours later, children would kick a ball around while screaming “Ronaldo!” I was baffled to learn that these reptiles frequently visit the school, sunbathing on the playing field each morning. I was even more baffled to learn that nobody was particularly bothered.

Lounging in the sun, Komodo dragons might appear to be gentle giants, yet these colossal creatures harbour a bite that can cause catastrophic blood loss and shock, easily killing a human. It’s a common

misconception that bacteria are the culprit for their deadly bite – the actual danger lies in their venom, which is similar to that of the North American Gila monster. Though its name sounds menacing, the Gila monster weighs just 2kg and is relatively harmless to humans. Komodo dragons, on the other hand, can tip the scales at 90kg. They bear sharp, serrated teeth that create deep lacerations, allowing their complex glands to ooze venom into their victim’s wounds.

Prior to this trip, I had spent two months in rural Nepali villages, where I witnessed a very different human-predator dynamic. I had been immersed in a community that had struggled with the leopards that lurked near their homes, and had shared in the grief of families who had lost children. Yet, strolling through Komodo village, I saw locals carrying out daily tasks with Komodo dragons spectating from mere feet away. The lack of conflict was astonishing and enlightening.

Where is Komodo island?



Komodo island is in Indonesia, between the much larger islands of Sumbawa (to the east) and Flores. Komodo National Park encompasses the island of Komodo as well as Padar and Rinca.

● KOMODO DRAGONS

The Ata Modo believe they share a familial bond with Komodo dragons, something deeply rooted in their culture and traditions. I experienced this bond first-hand while staying with Muhammed Sidik, a sixth-generation Ata Modo and my guide.

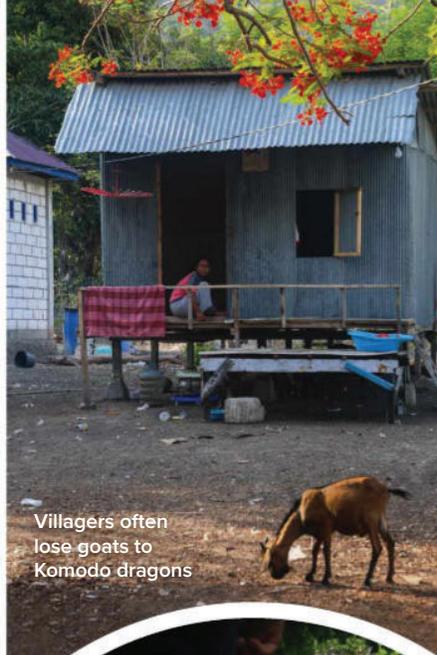
ONE SCORCHING AFTERNOON, while strolling through the forest surrounding the village, we encountered a huge male dragon sheltering under a tree. These creatures are typically solitary, except during mating season. In lieu of building dens, they seek refuge in natural shelters such as trees or burrows to keep cool during the hottest parts of the day.

I was content to view the lizard from afar but Sidik felt inclined to provide a more immersive experience. He rustled some leaves, capturing the dragon's attention. I watched in fear as the creature lumbered in our direction, its massive tail swinging rhythmically with each step. My options were limited. Given my poor level of fitness, outrunning a beast capable of speeds of 20kph felt pretty hopeless, yet staying put was no more appealing. Komodo dragons use their venom strategically. They ambush and stalk large prey, such as water buffalo, for days, delivering a bite and then waiting patiently for their quarry to die. A feeble human like me could be a goner in hours.

These lizards can detect blood from up to 10km away – I wondered if they were equally attuned to fear. I was preparing to utter a Hail Mary when a chain of events unfolded that I can hardly believe actually happened. Sidik, like many Ata Modo, always carried a sturdy stick. With a subtle wrist motion, he moved it ever so slightly, without touching the dragon. The dragon stopped in its tracks and sat down. It appeared to scoff at Sidik, who just chuckled in response.

The Ata Modo's sticks are about a metre long and split into a Y shape at the end, a nod to the reptile's forked tongue, and are used to prevent violent encounters. If a dragon gets too close for comfort, a villager might gently use the stick to guide the dragon's head away. Should the dragon continue to encroach or exhibit aggressive behavior, they may gently tap it on the head. Experts like Sidik can redirect a Komodo dragon without touching it, especially when dealing with older animals that have lived among the Ata Modo for some time.

Sidik quickly subdued the male, sweeping the stick in a downwards arc, directly into the dragon's line of sight but without contact. This specific motion is effective because it capitalises on the dragon's ability to detect subtle movements, allowing Sidik to influence its focus and behaviour. It was



Villagers often lose goats to Komodo dragons



The Ata Modo are experts at redirecting the dragons

an encounter that highlighted the remarkable ways the Ata Modo have adapted to live alongside these creatures.

THE ATA MODO'S PROFOUND understanding of Komodo dragon behaviour stems from their deep cultural connection with these creatures. Prior to 1980, when Komodo National Park was designated to protect the dragons, the Ata Modo were nomadic hunter-gatherers, adept at hunting large game such as Timor deer and water buffalo. To keep peace with the reptiles and prevent them from scavenging their hunts, the Ata Modo removed the entrails of their quarry and offered them to the dragons on large leaves, distracting them long enough to transport their kills safely back to the village.

Hunting is no longer practised in the village and for sustenance the Ata Modo now rely on food products imported from the island of Flores and fishing. But the tradition of sharing meals with the dragons persists,



A dragon swims just off the beach of Rinca island



Komodo dragons battle to establish dominance, often fighting over food and mates



“Komodo dragons hold a place in Ata Modo society beyond that of mere wildlife - they are considered kin”

highlighted during the annual Komodo Culture Festival. The Ata Modo prepare food offerings, dining in communion as the dragons feast nearby on leafy plates.

Komodo dragons hold a place in Ata Modo society far beyond that of mere wildlife - they are considered kin. In the local vernacular, dragons are referred to as *sebai*, which translates to ‘sibling’. The dragons regularly consume villagers’ goats but the Ata Modo rarely contain them and do little to prevent livestock predation. The nonchalance was startling, given that livestock predation commonly fuels human-wildlife conflict. “The dragons are my cousins,” said one villager. “If they take

my goats, I understand they are hungry. I don’t bear them ill will.”

During my time in Nepal, people frequently told me that if I liked the leopards so much, I should take them home to America with me. Locals there who had lost goats showed little concern for the cats’ hunger. The difference in attitudes was stark, highlighting how cultural beliefs can nurture coexistence.

My walks with Sidik became a cherished daily ritual, filled with fascinating stories and his extensive local knowledge. He introduced me to some of the other extraordinary creatures that call the area home. Strolling across the island, we encountered two of

● KOMODO DRAGONS

A male dragon searches for food in mangroves at low tide

A legend is born

Komodo dragons are central to Ata Modo culture, as captured in a foundational legend. A woman called Epa was pregnant with twins, one of which was a Komodo dragon. Epa named him Ora. Epa's husband abandoned the family, unable to accept his reptilian son. Epa single-handedly raised Ora and her human daughter, Ndasa. Ora faced disdain from the villagers, so Epa moved him into the forest, making daily visits to care for him.

Ndasa had no memory of Ora. Years later, hunting deer in the forest, she was enraged when a Komodo dragon snatched her prey. Ready to shoot, Ndasa lowered her weapon when Epa emerged from the shadows and revealed that the dragon was her brother. The trio returned to the village, where the Ata Modo welcomed Ora and made a vow to protect Komodo dragons from then on.



The young climb trees to escape being eaten by adult dragons



Breeding females use the mound nests of the chicken-like megapode

the 2,000 yellow-crested cockatoos that remain in the wild. I couldn't help but smile as I observed these spirited birds seemingly engage in lighthearted banter atop a tree. Our adventures also led us to the island's stunning beaches. The vibrant blue water, adorned with abstract rock formations, seemed endless. I was enchanted by the playful antics of a dugong blowing bubbles just beneath the water's shimmering surface.

ON ONE PARTICULARLY memorable day, Sidik pointed out a baby Komodo dragon. Without his keen eye, I would have mistaken it for another lizard. The youngster's deep black colouring, embellished with bright yellow spots, is drastically different from its smoky grey elders. Sidik explained that this colouration provides young Komodo dragons with camouflage when evading predators in trees, a vital survival skill. Youngsters have impressive climbing prowess, often entering households to escape danger, but lose this agility as they grow heavier with age. Cannibalism from adult dragons is common: I was fascinated to learn that approximately

10 per cent of an adult's diet is comprised of youngsters.

One morning, we ventured to a hilltop overlooking the village. The settlement, nestled within a bay and shielded by a hill to the south, is largely cut off from any cooling winds. Homes constructed from concrete and tin transform the village into a sweltering oven, and it was a relief to meet the brisk breeze at the summit.

I drew a deep, soothing breath. Behind us stood a quaint bamboo house on stilts. Sidik identified the structure as a replica of a traditional Ata Modo dwelling, reminiscent of his childhood home. Below it, a dragon lounged perilously close to the ladder leading to the entrance. Sidik reassured me that it was safe to enter.

The dragon fixed its gaze on me as I ascended the shaky steps. Inside, Sidik and I took seats opposite each other. My eyes wandered around the room, taking in the array of drums and feather-adorned sticks hanging from the ceiling. Cracks in the floorboards revealed the hulk of the immobile dragon below but, so captivated

was I by Sidik's stories of spirituality and religion, I gradually forgot it was there.

As we grapple with unprecedented biodiversity loss, the contributions of communities such as the Ata Modo to global conservation efforts are increasingly vital. While these communities constitute just 5 per cent of the world's population, they safeguard 80 per cent of its biodiversity. Yet this stewardship is under threat, as indigenous cultures are vanishing at an alarming pace. Global initiatives to recognise and preserve their wisdom, traditions and lifestyles are imperative.

I have spent more time in remote villages than most 20-something Americans, observing an array of human-wildlife interactions. But my time among the Ata Modo reshaped my understanding of human-wildlife coexistence. Leaving Komodo island, I carried far more with me than tales of lizards and legends. **W**

“Cannibalism is common: around 10 per cent of an adult dragon's diet is comprised of youngsters”