



BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Muffin, a female Komodo dragon, has her eye tended to after cataract surgery. The first time National Zoo officials tried to mate her with Friendly, he almost ate her.

No Love at First Bite

Zoo Hopes Dragons' 2nd Try at Mating Will Be Gentler

By Victoria Benning
Washington Post Staff Writer

It's hard to imagine a worse blind date. When Muffin met Friendly last summer, he did more than reject her companionship. He tried to eat her.

But there are always second chances. And when the two Komodo dragons have their next rendezvous at the National Zoo in a month or so, Muffin will be in a better position to defend herself if things go awry. This week, her keepers arranged for her to have cataract surgery so she can see well enough to follow Friendly's every move.

The National Zoo has the only zoo-breeding Komodos outside of Indonesia and Australia. Muffin is on loan from the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, and zoo officials want to mate her because her offspring would diversify the gene pool.

The problem is that Friendly, nine feet long and 130 pounds, is more than three times the size of Muffin, who is about six feet and 42 pounds. It's quite possible that he will try to turn her into a meal once again, said Trooper Walsh, a zoo biologist.

"He's normally pretty gentle and friendly—by dragon standards—but if for some reason he's not attracted to her, he could decide she's a better source of protein than potential mate," Walsh said.

The "love nips" Muffin suffered during their first encounter probably would have torn an arm off a human, Walsh said.

Fortunately, Muffin has a pretty thick hide. But she was blind in her right eye, and zoo officials decided she would need better vision before their mating experiment could continue.

See DRAGON, B4, Col. 1

No Love at First Bite: Dragons to Meet Again

DRAGON, From B1

Komodo dragons, native to Indonesia and classified as an endangered species, are the world's largest species of lizard and can grow up to 10 feet long and 250 pounds.

Muffin's cataract surgery is believed to be the first of its kind performed on a dragon. The operation was done Wednesday by veterinary ophthalmologist Seth Koch at the South Paws Veterinary Referral Center in Springfield. The zoo lacked the special equipment needed for the surgery, which took about 20 minutes.

Koch's typical patients are dogs, cats and horses, although he has been a consultant to the zoo for more than 20 years.

"It went beautifully. We're real happy with the way it turned out," Koch said.

Although it will be a few weeks before her eye is completely healed, Muffin already was experiencing improved vision yesterday. Her eye

was clear, and she seemed to be looking around in every direction.

But her problems are not over. At 21, she is beyond the normal breeding age, and her ovaries are not functioning.

So zoo officials will inject her with hormones—in a sort of fertility treatment for lizards—in hopes of stimulating ovulation. They'll use ultrasound to monitor her ovaries to see if they're responding to the treatment. If they do, Muffin could meet Friendly in about a month.

The fertility procedure also will be a first for a Komodo, and Walsh said there is no guarantee it will work. Muffin has never produced offspring; she did produce infertile eggs while at the Ueno Zoo.

Muffin's advanced age makes her too lethargic to be a good exhibit animal, so her value in captivity at this point is breeding, zoo officials said.

In a special section of the zoo's reptile complex, veterinarian Lucy Spelman applied some ointment yesterday to Muffin's right eye. The



BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Charles Koutris, a keeper for the Komodo dragons at the National Zoo, visits with one of his charges.

dragon appeared to have her appetite back as she snacked on a fat, juicy rat—a good sign, her doctors said.

Outside, in the dragon exhibit, 16-year-old Friendly lounged in the sun, oblivious to the pains being taken to prepare his potential mate.