

# FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

## The Gila Monster



Photo: Dr. Daniel Beck

### A MONSTER IN TROUBLE

Gila Monsters have declined dramatically in Utah and urgently need federal protection. While Monster populations are not yet decreasing across their entire range, which includes portions of Arizona, California, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and northern Mexico, Utah has shifted from boasting some of the highest densities of this species (as many as 20 per square mile) to losing most of its Gila Monster populations altogether. The primary threat is human population growth in and around St. George, with accompanying proliferation of roads. An additional danger to this venomous lizard is predation by dogs and cats.

### PROTECTING THE MONSTER'S HOME

In Utah, the Gila Monster inhabits generally rocky terrain in transition areas between the Mohave and Great Basin deserts. Its habitat in Utah sees very low rainfall, which primarily falls in winter, cold winters and hot summers, and long, mild winter storms. Protection of the Gila Monster in Utah would benefit the imperiled Desert Tortoise and a multitude of wildlife and plants that call this biologically important area home.

### KNOW YOUR MONSTER

- **A Venomous Friend:** the only venomous lizard in the U.S., Gila Monsters are very reluctant to bite humans, with most bites on record traceable to carelessness, foul play, or alcohol. The Monster's complex venom contains substances that can treat diabetes and attention deficit disorders.
- **Three Square Meals:** an adult Gila Monster requires about 1.2 lbs of food per year, and scientists have observed a Gila Monster eating one-third of its yearly requirements in one sitting. Gila Monsters are highly specialized, feeding only on eggs or nestlings of vertebrates, such as rabbits and birds.
- **Life in a Burrow:** the Gila Monster spends approximately 95 percent of its life in shelters and burrows, which help to regulate its body temperature.
- **Fighting for their Women:** Gila Monsters engage in an ancient, fascinating combat dance, where males intertwine their bodies, sometimes for many hours, in an attempt to show dominance. The winner gets to mate with a female waiting nearby.

### CLIMATE CHAOS

Hotter and drier weather caused by climate change can increase the danger of overheating and dehydration to Gila Monsters, as well as reducing their prey.

