

When death calls: a defunct phone booth as an unusual, unintentional trap for lizards in French Polynesia

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The unintentional entrapment of reptiles has been observed with some frequency over the last decade. These include captures in fishing traps (e.g., Crane et al., 2016), olive-harvesting nets (Zevgolits and Christopoulos, 2023), other human-discarded items (e.g., Miranda et al., 2013; Udyawer et al., 2013; Blettler and Mitchell, 2021; Zdunek and Kolenda, 2022; Pravatiner and Zecenaro, 2025), desert wells (Zdunek et al., 2023), and abandoned nets (e.g., Stelfox et al., 2016; Patel et al., 2022; 2023; Christopoulos and Zevgolits, 2023; Zdunek and Kłodawska, 2023). Such threats have not yet been documented among terrestrial reptiles in French Polynesia. We here present an observation of an unusual, unintentional anthropogenic trap.

The observation was made on 10 October 2025 by the first author on Toau Atoll, which is located 14 km northwest of Fakarava in the Palliser Islands of French Polynesia (15.8025°S, 146.1503°W; elevation 3 m). He noticed an inactive telephone booth, likely left standing for decorative purposes. Upon closer inspection, he found that the transparent casing above the defunct telephone turned out to be a trap for lizards (Fig. 1). The skeletons of at least 12 dead lizards were visible behind the plastic window, including skinks, likely *Emoia cyanura* (Lesson, 1830), and geckos, likely *Hemidactylus frenatus* Duméril & Bibron, 1836. The telephone booth was reported to residents, and the casing was sealed to prevent further fatalities.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first documented evidence of this type of trap in French Polynesia, and perhaps anywhere. Tourism and the spread of human development tend to reduce lizard habitats and significantly impact the presence of geckos and skinks on

these small islands, and this is especially true given the specific locations where these lizards are found (e.g., Smith et al., 2012; Dotte-Sarout and Kahn, 2017; Chevillotte et al., 2024). The potential effects of urbanization on the ecology of skink and gecko populations, including their habitat use, are also well understood (Zdunek, 2023). Observations such as these, even as single events, can broaden the scope of information about the influence of the modified environment and the threats to lizards. Such a modified environment increases the likelihood of an unintentional anthropogenic trap occurring.

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Figure 1. Out-of-service decorative telephone booth with trapped skinks and geckos on Toau Atoll, French Polynesia. The lizards were probably attracted by the search for shelter, food, or a place for thermoregulation. Photos by Thierry Gagliano.

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