

It's gecko, not salamander ^[1]

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By Juan Diego Daza / Special for El Nuevo Día Cited from endi.com ^[2] In Puerto Rico exists nine species of a type of lizard locally known as salamanders. Of these, most popular they are the translucent ones that come out at night to feed on insects, attracted by the shining lights. But the truth is that all those that inhabit the island of Puerto Rico are not translucent, and none of them is a true salamander. It is peculiar that these frequently urban animals are known by a name that belongs to a group of amphibians. Since my study is based on this group of lizards, I looked for the origin of this confusion that so is rooted in the language. My first attempt was in the computer. If I write the word salamander in the word processor Word and I use the synonyms command, the three first words that I get are: small lizard, gecko and aquatic animal, that without mentioning the sixth, that one would cause still more confusion (I leave it for the curious ones). Obvious, the error was incorporated to the word processor, but those first two synonyms are more biologically correct terms for the translucent lizards. My second attempt was with the Dictionary of the Real Spanish Academy. According to this one, Salamander comes from the Greek and is an amphibian of about 20 centimeters in length, smooth skin, of black color and with many yellow spots, definition based on the fire salamander, an animal that lives in the forests of Europe, Asia and Africa. Pliny the Old one, in one of his volumes on Natural History, wrote that the salamander was an animal so intensely cold that it could extinguish the fire on contact. It was common that the people of old Europe related these animals to fire. The salamanders use hollow trunks to hibernate, so when people threw the trunks to the fire, the salamanders woke up and began to secrete a milky substance through the skin, which was interpreted as a fire extinguisher. It is obvious that these amphibians differ enough from what we locally know as a salamander. The term salamanquesa (gecko) is obviously an alteration of salamander, but applied to these reptiles exclusively. Gecko on the other hand is originated of ge'kok, which in one of the Malayan-Polynesian languages represents the sounds that the species makes. The geckos, unlike the salamanders live virtually in all the tropical zones of the world. In the Caribbean, there is a high biodiversity and unique species in the world. For example the islands of Mona, Monito and Desecheo, each one counts on own species of gecko. Another important characteristic of the geckos is the reduced size that some species can reach; in Dominican Republic a species measures only 16 millimeters, a little less than the diameter of one currency of 10 cents.

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