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HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF AFRICA

NEWSLETTER



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HERPETOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF AFRICA

Founded 1965

The HAA is dedicated to the study and conservation of African reptiles and amphibians. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in the African herpetofauna. Members receive the *Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa* (which publishes technical articles- subject to peer review, notes, book reviews and bibliographies) and *African Herp News* (HAA Newsletter), which includes news items, husbandry hints, announcements, etc).

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EDITORIAL

As most of you probably know by now, the *Second H.A.A. Symposium on African Herpetology* will take place at the National Museum in Bloemfontein from 8-11 April 1991 (see announcement on page 2).

To date, titles have been received for 31 papers, 8 posters and 2 slide shows. It is quite surprising however, to note that only 8 papers deal with reptile husbandry. Surely there are more husbandrists around?

At this stage four Guest Speakers have been invited to the Symposium. They are Prof. J.C. Poynton (University of Natal), who is perhaps best known for *The Amphibia of southern Africa: a faunal study* and the four part series *Amphibia Zambesiaca* (with Dr D.G. Broadley as co-author); Mr. Bert Langewerf (Agama International Herpetocultural Institute, United States of America), who is currently building up the world's largest lizard breeding farm and who has, so far in 1990, bred 750 lizards; Dr. D.G. Broadley (Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe), who revised *FitzSimon's Snakes of southern Africa* and has reviewed and revised numerous African snake and lizard genera; and well-known herpetologist Prof. Aaron Bauer of Villanova University, United States of America. With Guest Speakers like these, how could anyone dare miss the Symposium?!

Regarding the H.A.A. General Meeting, to be held during the forthcoming Symposium, I would like to remind members that any amendments to the H.A.A. Constitution which they may want to discuss, must be submitted to the Secretary in writing by 8 February 1991 (see *African Herp News* 13: 5-14).

Finally, I would like to thank those persons who contributed articles and news items for this issue of *African Herp News*.

All the best for 1991.

Mike Bates
Chairman/Newsletter Editor



INSTITUTIONAL NEWS

CURRENT HERPETOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND RELATED ACTIVITIES IN NAMIBIA

Namibia has a wide diversity of landscape and a broad herpetofaunal diversity to match. At last count, 52 species of frogs and 222 species of reptiles occur or are expected to occur here. The greatest diversity of frogs and amphibious reptiles are found in the Caprivi strip as one would expect, and the Namib Desert hosts the largest diversity of endemic and near-endemic reptiles; fully 90% of Namibia's endemic herpetofauna (mainly Gekkonidae) are from the Namib, pro-Namib and adjacent areas.

Past workers have had a great interest in the Namib Desert, more so than any other area in Namibia, and this in-part led to the establishment of the Namib Desert Research Station at Gobabeb in 1963. The presence of this station has ensured that the momentum created by earlier researchers would be sustained. The station has been involved with studies which have led to approximately 40 papers on Namib Desert herpetology, about 8% of the station's entire output.

The State Museum of Namibia houses the national collection, and very occasionally houses a national herpetologist as well. During the past 20 years, herpetologists have been in residence for a total of only four years. Consequently, most recent work has been done by visiting foreign scientists. This historical situation is also reflected in the paucity of type material lodged in the museum; of Namibia's 27 species of endemic herpetofauna, only 6 species are represented by holotype or paratype material. The State Museum currently houses 7 500 reptile specimens and 850 amphibian specimens, and is being curated by R.E. Griffin (Curator of Arachnids, Myriapods and Lower Vertebrates).

Current activities involving Namibian reptiles and amphibians can be split into three broad categories: 1) Research conducted by the Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism, this being conservation orientated, 2) commercial enterprises (three crocodile farms are active in Namibia, and one reptile park is now under construction), and 3) research conducted by local and foreign visiting scientists, which is usually academic in nature. Below is a list of active programmes in the latter category.

Comparative Reproductive Biology and Behavioural Ecology of *Agama aculeata* and *Agama planiceps* in the Windhoek area, N. Heideman (University of Namibia). A long-term programme.

Ecological Physiology of the Savannah Monitor, *Varanus albigularis*, J.A. Phillips (Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species, Zoological Society of San Diego). An 18-month study centered in the Etosha National Park.

Ecophysiology and Biology of *Angolosaurus skoogi* in the Northern Namib Dunes, M.K. Seely (Desert Ecological Research Unit, Gobabeb). A broad spectrum and ever-evolving long-term programme, involving a number of specialist visiting scientists, in particular D. Mitchell (University of the Witwatersrand) and B. Clark (University of

Cape Town) who is now conducting full-time lab and field work on the physiology of this lizard toward a PhD degree.

Herpetology of the Namib Desert west of the 100 mm Isohyet, W.D. Haacke (Transvaal Museum). A long-term opportunistic and comprehensive study started in 1963.

Two new projects have recently been registered, but as yet are still in the infant stages (in Namibia at least): Communication and Social Behaviour in Barking Geckos (*Ptenopus*), S. Telford (University of Cape Town), and Evolution of the Bufonidae in Southern Africa, M. Cherry (South African Museum).

Several other herpetologists visit Namibia irregularly and opportunistically: A.M. Bauer (Villanova University), Investigation of the Phylogenetics, Systematics, Historical Biogeography, and Evolutionary Morphology of the Herpetofauna of Southern Africa, with special reference to the family Gekkonidae; A. Channing (University of the Western Cape), Biogeography and Systematics of Southern African Anura; K. Nagy (University of California, Los Angeles), Ecophysiology of Desert Reptiles; P. Freed (Houston Zoo) Parasitology, and Husbandry of Southern African Reptiles. In addition, several local Southern African herpetologists are working on Namibian fauna as part of their broader-based surveys, i.e., D.G. Broadley & J.C. Poynton in their Amphibia Zambesiaca; D.G. Broadley in his various revisions of Southern African genera, and as reviser of "FitzSimons Snakes", as well as including the Caprivi Strip in his Herpetologica Zambesiaca; and W.D. Haacke, and W.R. Branch, in their broad Southern African surveys.

Herpetological research in the Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism (formerly the Department of Agriculture and Nature Conservation) is conducted by myself, the Small Animal Biologist. This is not a full-time assignment though, as I also have 140 species of small mammals and approximately 250,000 species of invertebrates to look after. The main thrust of our research is to define the "conservation status" of all these species, and to monitor species of conservation concern. Since the taxonomic status/systematic placement of a taxon is the first point in defining a species' conservation status, considerable effort is now being put into this aspect. Detailed taxonomic and/or biogeographical studies are currently underway with *Aporosaura*, *Meroles* and *Pedioplanis* (with D. Gordon, formerly of the Transvaal Museum), *Homopus bergeri*, *Python sebae* and *Python anchietae* (with W.R. Branch), Namibian *Cordylus* species (with P. Le F. Mouton), and Namibian frogs (with A. Channing). Red Data Books are now in preparation and will define the conservation status of every species of Namibian reptile and amphibian.

Surveys of reptiles and amphibians are being conducted in all Namibian Conservation areas, with the aim of producing guide books for each area. Each guide book will be detailed enough to be of use to local conservation staff and visiting scientists, and general enough to be of interest to tourists as well. An additional long-term project is to produce a monograph on Namibian lizards.

The problem of the Eastern National Water Carrier (canal) was reported on earlier (see *J. Herp. Assoc. Afr.* 36: 36-37). The problem still exists as no practical method has

yet been found to exclude local wildlife from the canal. We are currently testing a number of structures, several of which show promise. Mortality rates are intensively measured twice a year, during winter and summer.

We are also engaged in a *Python anchietae* captive-breeding programme, which is a joint venture with the Transvaal Snake Park. Our involvement revolves around our desire to make captive-bred specimens available to foreign research and educational institutions, and to supply specimens to known (legitimate) breeding programmes to ensure genetic diversity of these captive populations. A spin-off of this programme may be a reduced demand for wild-caught specimens.

The latest addition to our programme is a capture-mark-release programme on the Green Turtles which aggregate at the mouth of the Kunene River. The disjunct population of Nile Soft-Shelled Turtles which also occur there, are also opportunistically marked.

Lastly, another aspect of the conservation side of Namibian herpetology deals with the illegal trade in local reptiles. This is a South African-based market, centering around Johannesburg and Cape Town. Animals are illegally collected and exported from Namibia, illegally imported into the Republic of South Africa, and supplied to local and overseas collectors, foreign markets and museums (as preserved specimens). To our knowledge, this activity has not yet caused any serious conservation problems. The majority of Namibian species of conservation concern are protected by their habitat and habits. The habitats of some rupicolous species are, however, limited in extent and may be destroyed by unscrupulous collectors. Stricter border control, since Namibian independence, and increased fines (up to R20 000 for some reptile species) may discourage some collectors.

Submitted by: Mike Griffin, Biologist - Small Terrestrial Animals, Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism, P.O. Box 13306, Windhoek, Namibia, 9000.

TRANSVAAL DIVISION OF NATURE CONSERVATION

A final report on the project "The distribution and status of reptiles and amphibians in the Transvaal" was submitted during 1990. Altogether, 212 reptile and 53 amphibian taxa were recorded from the province, of which four were described during the study. Another 15 incorporated in the species accounts remain to be formally described, while new taxa exist in the complex genera *Lygodactylus*, *Bradypodion* and *Pedioplanis*.

The report also proposes several nomenclatural changes, including the elevation to species status of *Afroedura multiporis* with *A. m. haackei* closely related. The *Pachydactylus capensis* complex has been split into three species, including *P. c. capensis*, *P. affinis* and *P. vansoni*. However, additional work needs to be conducted on these sibling species as the formulation of a workable key is of prime concern and needs to be addressed further.

Although there is some difference of opinion as to the validity of *Agama aculeata armata*, in the Transvaal, this taxon as described by Peters (1882) occurs only to the north of the Soutpansberg and is recognisable by the total reticulate nature of the gular. Its apparent geographical isolation in the Transvaal leads me to accept it as a valid taxon. *Nucras taenioata ornata* has been split into *N. holubi* which is characterised by a series of alternating light and dark dorsal stripes while *N. ornata* is a large eastern species which may have a vertebral stripe. *Cordylus vandami* has been re-elevated to species status, while changes to the genus *Platysaurus* have already been published elsewhere (*J. Herp. Ass. Afr.* 36:51-63).

The report incorporates many range extensions, a few of which have been published in the *Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa* 34:50 and summarizes much existing biological knowledge, including observations made during the survey.

The Transvaal roughly incorporates 50% of the species and subspecies of herpetofauna found in South Africa. Of the 265 taxa found in the province, 225 are to be found in one or more conservation area. This means that 40 species have not been recorded from any formal conservation area to date. However, as surveys of such areas are still incomplete, it is possible that some of these species will indeed be found in reserves. During this survey, six species which had previously been recorded from the province were not found. These include an endemic species, *Tetradactylus eastwoodae* from the Woodbush area, a species which may be extinct as a result of afforestation. These species will now be the target of more in-depth surveys, hopefully with positive results. Such surveys will be initiated during the coming summer months.

At this stage, research is focussed on sorting out the genus *Lygodactylus*, which will hopefully be completed soon. The publication of my final report will also receive high priority in order to make it available to interest parties, a feature which I am unable to do at present owing to the voluminous document.

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