Examining the patterns and processes of speciation and species diversity in Australian Gehyra gecko lizards

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Earth and Environmental Sciences
The University of Adelaide
September, 2011
“The footsteps of Nature are to be trac'd, not only in her ordinary course, but when she seems to be put to her shifts, to make many doublings and turnings, and to use some kind of art in endeavouring to avoid our discovery.”

**Declaration**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Mark Sistrom and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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This work was funded by an ARC Environmental Futures Network travel award (2008), an Adelaide University postgraduate travel award (2010) and a BushBlitz capacity building grant (2011) awarded to the author. Core project funding was provided by Australian Biological Resources Study grant 207-43 awarded to Dr. Mark Hutchinson and Professor Steve Donnellan.

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Abstract

Understanding the process of speciation and the nature of relationships between species is one of the fundamental aims of evolutionary biology. These processes are integral to the study of species delimitation and taxonomy, phylogenetic reconstruction and evolutionary history and the study of speciation processes. Under this premise I evaluate a recently evolved and taxonomically challenging group—the Gehyra geckos of Australia, to gain a better understanding of how the process of speciation and species relationships have developed in this genus.

My research has three main aims:

1) Explore the adequacy of current taxonomy in accounting for species diversity in the group and improve it where necessary: Gehyra have proven taxonomically troublesome historically, with extensive and geographically complex arrangements of genetic diversity apparently not associated with patterns of morphological diversity. I explored species delimitation and the taxonomic status of lineages within the arid-adapted Gehyra variegata species complex using multi-locus (mtDNA, nuclear loci, karyotypes) genetic, distribution and morphological data, generating the first comprehensive phylogenetic framework for the genus. I describe one new species and identify an additional five putative species. I support previously hypothesized high levels of cryptic diversity in the group and present a concentrated effort in taxonomically resolving the genus.

2) Evaluate previously proposed evolutionary scenarios for the diversification of the Australian Gehyra and propose a comprehensive evolutionary history of the group: Using a multi-locus dataset (one mtDNA locus, six nuclear loci), I generated a calibrated
species tree of the group, which showed support for a late-Eocene to mid Miocene introduction of the genus to Australia from Asia and for the division of the Australian *Gehyra* into a tropically-adapted *Gehyra australis* species complex and a generally arid-adapted *Gehyra variegata* species complex containing morphologically transitionary species in the Kimberley region. My analyses did not support a previously suggested model of chromosomally driven speciation in Australian *Gehyra* and assert that diversification of both species complexes occurred simultaneously from the late Micoene through to the present.

I undertook a quantitative evaluation of gene tree discordance in *Gehyra*, showing a high degree of discordance between genes for the group, further supporting the recent diversification of the group.

3) *Examine possible processes of speciation in Australian Gehyra*: I investigated a case study in which a geographically constrained, distinct population of *Gehyra* was shown to be morphologically and ecologically distinct but genetically indistinguishable from a comparatively widespread, geographically parapatric species. This indicates a scenario of emergent, ecological speciation and presents a model system in which the process of ecological speciation could be observed. It also contrasts previous studies highlighting allopatric speciation driving the Australian *Gehyra* radiation, showing ecological speciation may play an important role.

In carrying out these studies, I have both explored the use of emergent methods for delimiting species and evaluating relationships between species, and significantly increased our understanding of the Australian *Gehyra* radiation. This body of work represents an ideal framework for rapid and effective evaluation of novel *Gehyra* species
and will greatly assist in discovering and documenting the diversity of this problematic radiation in the future.
Acknowledgements

I thank my supervisors for their advice, support and encouragement - and occasional mad dash to a hospital bedside to make sure I hadn’t rattled loose all of my marbles. I also express deep gratitude to many of the students and staff at Australian Centre for Evolutionary Biology and Biodiversity (ACEBB) for their time, advice and friendship over the course of my PhD – namely, but not limited to Paul Oliver, Annabel Smith, Terry Bertozzi, Kathy Saint, Alison Fitch, Lizzie Perkins, Jaro Guzinski, Duncan Jardine, Gaynor Dolman, Adam Skinner, Christina Adler and many others. I especially express my deep gratitude to Kate Sanders and Ralph Foster for their professional and personal advice, friendship and for putting a roof over my head when I had none.

I also thank Lacey Knowles and her lab group for allowing me to visit for several months and putting up with me being the dumb kid in lab meetings which hauled my development as a scientist forward in leaps and bounds.

I express a profound level of debt and gratitude to my parents and family for nurturing my passion for the natural world from a young age and going above and beyond in providing me the best education possible – even when I was too myopic and stubborn to appreciate your efforts.

Last and certainly not least I thank my wife, Dan Edwards. You have been my closest confidant, by most scathing critic and adherent supporter throughout this journey. Whenever I’ve needed support, you’ve been there and I am forever in your debt.

Without you all I would not have succeeded in completing the work within. This work has been supported by funding from Australian Biological Resources Study, ARC Environmental Futures Network, BushBlitz and The University of Adelaide.
Notes on chapter styles

Chapter 1 is published in the journal *Zootaxa* and thus follows that journal format precisely. Chapter 2 is intended for submission in the journal *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution* and is thus formatted in the style prescribed by that journal. Chapter 3 is intended for submission in the journal *Systematic Biology* and thus follows that journal’s style precisely. Chapter 4 is published in the *Journal of Evolutionary Biology* and thus follows that journal’s style precisely.

A statement declaring co-author contributions prefaces each chapter submitted or intended for publication.

The format of this thesis complies with that outlined in “Specifications for Thesis 2011” provided by the University of Adelaide Graduate Centre: