

3 new monitor lizards from the Philippines identified

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German scientist Andre Koch from the Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig in Bonn together with his supervisor Dr. Wolfgang Boehme and another colleague have described two new monitor lizard species and one new subspecies from the Philippines in a recent article. The species descriptions were published in *Zootaxa*, the world's foremost journal for taxonomic zoology.

"After the spectacular discovery of several new monitor [lizards](#) from the [Indonesian island](#) of Sulawesi three years ago, our results now illustrate that the diversity of water monitor lizards in the Philippines has also been largely underestimated" says André Koch, who will soon complete his doctoral thesis at the University of Bonn. Southeast Asian monitor lizards are one main focus of his dissertation, which he writes at the Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK).

Prof Böhme, vice-director of the ZFMK and head of the herpetology section, has investigated monitor lizards since more than 20 years, and adds: "It's amazing that these largest living lizards of the world have been neglected for so long and that new species come up time and again. It shows that even with large vertebrates not all species of our planet are recognized and named. There are too few experts in the world, the education level at universities is declining and the essential knowledge about the global biodiversity stands to get lost!"

Co-author Dr Maren Gaulke (GeoBio-Center LMU, Munich), an expert for Philippine reptiles, particularly monitor lizards, has been studying the

biology of these impressive giant reptiles for 25 years: "Monitor lizards are fantastic creatures. They are agile, powerful, and the most intelligent lizards of the world."

The three new Philippine monitors were identified based on examination of numerous preserved voucher specimens in various major European natural history museums, in combination with long-term studies in the field. This impressively demonstrates the immense importance of such museum collections as the archives of the global biodiversity.

Unfortunately, in times of limited public funding, the necessary curatorial positions are often not reoccupied, when a scientist is retired. This disastrously affects not only the corresponding collections but also the related field of knowledge!

Thus, one of the new monitor species, which is known from only two specimens in the Zoological Museum of Copenhagen, was named after the late Jens B. Rasmussen, former herpetologist of the museum collections there, whose position was not reopened again. Thereby, the authors want also to call attention to the global taxonomy crisis.

The Philippines comprise more than 7,000 tropical islands. This island nation is well known for its extraordinary biological richness and diversity. It is one of the biodiversity hotspots of our planet, a real megadiversity country. This is not just true for coral fishes or butterflies and other small insects, but also for the large predators in this region, the monitor lizards (genus *Varanus*).

An earlier study on the systematics and diversity of Southeast Asian water monitor lizards (*Varanus salvator*, see Koch et al. 2007) showed that the three Philippine members, which were originally treated as subspecies, actually represent distinct [species](#) because they are separated by significant differences. Thus, the three newly discovered monitor lizards double at once the number of known Philippine water monitors.

More information: KOCH, A., GAULKE, M. & BÖHME W. (2010) Unravelling the underestimated diversity of Philippine water monitor lizards (Squamata: Varanus salvator complex), with the description of two new species and a new subspecies. Zootaxa 2446: 1-54.

www.mapress.com/2010/f/z02446p054f.pdf

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