THE WATER REQUIREMENTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RODENTS, NOTOMYS ALEXIS, N. MITCHELLI AND PSEUDOMYS MINNIE

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS.

SUM	MARY		• •	••	••	• •	• •	••	i
DECLARATION									v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS									vi
l.	INTRODUCTIO	N	• •	••	••	••	• •	• •	1
2.	DISTRIBUTIO	N AND HAB	TATI	••	• •	••	••	••	13
	2.2 Notom 2.3 Preud 2.4 Food	ys alexis <u>ys mitche</u> omys minn duction	11i	• •	• • • • • •	• •	•••	• • • • • •	13 13 14 15 15
3.	EXPERIMENTA	L ANIMAL'S		• •	• •	••	• •	• •	16
	3.1 Captur 3.2 Cagin		••	• •	••	••	••	••	16 17
4.	WATER CONSUL	APTION.	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •	••	18
	4.1 Method 4.2 Result 4.3 Discus	ts	• • 5 •	•••	• •	••	• • • • 0 •	•••	20 20 21
5.	WATER DEPRIN	ATION	••	••	• •	• •		• •	24
	5.2.20	lortality hanges in	n wei	 ice d .ght d	lepriv of mic	red of	• • • • • • • • • • •	•• er	24 25 25
	5.2.3 E	of water ody weigh	nt an	Id mor	•talit	y of	mice	• •	26
	£ 5.3 Discus	iven wate sion	er .	••	••	••	••	••	27 28
6.	FOOD INTAKE		• •	••	••	• •	• •	• •	30
	6.l Method 6.2 Result 6.2.l	s Variation	of .	food	•• •• intak	 e wit	 h bod	••• У	33 34
	6.2.2 6.2.3	weight . Food ints Changes i	ke o n fo	f mic od in	e giv	en wa of mi	ter	••	34 35
		denied wa	ter	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •	36

		6.2.4 Water content of hulled oats 6.2.5 Water of oxidation and free water						37			
	6.3	Discu	in th	e foo	đ	• •	• •	• •	• •	38	
		6.3.1					•• esti	na en	••	41	
			drink	ing	-p		CAUL.	ing an		42	
		6.3.2	Unang	es in	body	weigh	it an	d foo	d	τω	
			intak	0						46	
		6.3.3	Parti	tioni	ng of	total	wat	er in	take.	47	
7.	URIN	ARY WAT	ER LOS	5	• •	• •	••	••		49	
	7.1	Metho	ds	••		••				51	
		7.1.1	Colle	ction	of ur	ine	••	•••	••	51	
		7.1.2	Colled	ction	of pl	asma				52	
		7.1.3	Analys	sis of) urin	le and	plas	sma	••	53	
	70	7.1.4	Kidne	y stru	acture		• •	• •	• •	54	
	7.2	Result			• •		• •	• •	••	54	
		7.2.1	Urine	conce	ntrat	ions	• •	• •		54	
		7.2.2	Thasma	a conc	entra	tions		• •	• •	57	
		7.2.4	Kidner		bolog	* *	••	••	• •	57	
	7.3	Discus	ssion	••	••	y	••	••	•••	59 61	
0							•••	••	••	ΟŢ	
8.	FAECA	L WATEF	LOSS		• •	• •	• •	• •	• •	65	
	8.1	Method	ls							67	
		8.1.1				faec	e e Ag	• •	• •	67	
		8.1.2	Faeces	prod	uctio	n	••		•••	68	3
	8.2	Result	s	• •	• •					68	
		8.2.1	Water	conte	nt of	faece	es		• •	68	
		8.2.2	Faeces	prod	uctio	n and	assi	milat	tion		
			01 100	d			• •	• •	• •	71	
	83	8.2.3 Discus	Faecal	. wate			• •	• •	• •	72	
	0.0	DISCUS	sion	••	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •	73	
9.	ACTIV	ITY	••	••	••	••	•	• •	••	77	
	9.1	Method	S						12	79	
	9.2	Result	S	• •		•• •			••	80	
	9.3	Discus	sion	••	• •		•	• •		81	
10.	DISCU	SSION	••	••	•• •			• •	••	84	
11.	BIBLI	OGRAPHY	• •	••	••					94	
						-	-			V T	

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4

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SUMMARY

A study was made of the water requirements of three species of Australian rodents. The two desert species <u>Notomys alexis and Pseudomys minnie</u> were independent of drinking water when kept in the laboratory on a diet of hulled oats (10 percent water by weight) and at a temperature of 21°C and relative humidities between 30 and 60 percent. <u>Notomys mitchelli</u>, a species from the semi-arid parts of southern Australia, kept under the same conditions, was less tolerant to water deprivation with almost half of this species dying by the 30th day without water.

When denied water, all rodents lost between 15 and 20 percent of their body weight during the first 5 days. But thereafter, <u>N. alexis</u> and <u>P. minnie</u> gained weight so that after 60 days without water they had very nearly returned to their original weight. However, the <u>N.</u> <u>mitchelli</u> were still losing weight after 30 days without water.

Food intake, faecal water loss and faeces production all dropped markedly when the rodents were initially denied water, but increased again after the 10th day without water. However, the recovery of the food intake and faecal water

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loss of <u>N. mitchelli</u> was much less than that of <u>N. alexis</u> and <u>P. minnie</u>.

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Urine osmotic concentrations of all species reached a maximum after 3 days without water. Urine samples collected until the 7th day showed no further increase in concentration. Whether fed hulled oats or sunflower seed, <u>N.</u> <u>alexis</u> produced the most concentrated urine of the three species. Feeding the rodents sunflower seed, a food higher in protein than hulled oats, resulted in higher urine concentrations from only <u>N. alexis</u> and <u>N. mitchelli</u>. Apparently the <u>Notomys</u> were better able to concentrate urea than <u>P. minnie</u>. <u>N. alexis</u> fed sunflower seed produced urine with the highest osmotic and urea concentrations measured in this study with means of 4511 mOsm/1 and 2985 mM/1 respectively.

Associated with the increase in urine concentrations was a marked decrease in urine volumes. Mice denied water yielded only 3 to 7 percent of the urine of mice drinking. The <u>Notomys</u>, which concentrated their urine more than <u>P. minnie</u>, voided less urine per gram body weight.

When denied water, the <u>N. alexis</u> initially decreased their running in activity wheels on the average by 78 per cent. However, after 20 days without water, activity had risen to 50 percent of its initial level. From these changes in body weight, food intake, urine concentrations and volumes, faecal water loss, faeces production and activity, it appears that the rate of metabolism of mice denied water initially decreased and so lessened the drain of water from their bodies. The first 3 to 5 days without water were a critical stage in their water balance, since it took this time for the major mechanism for conserving water, that of concentrating the urine, to reduce water loss to a minimum. As the withdrawal of water was sudden, this saving of water during the initial few days was important. This economy appeared to be accomplished by reducing metabolism.

Once urine concentrations reached their maximum, the rodents safely increased their food intake so avoiding possible starvation. The failure of <u>N. mitchelli</u>, the species least independent of drinking water, to recover its appetite completely further showed that food intake : and hence metabolism, decreased in response to the severe stress placed on their water metabolism. Only when water balance was maintained did food intake remain normal.

Thus <u>N. alexis</u>, the desert species, is best equipped for living under conditions of extreme aridity. This species lost the least weight when denied water, was the quickest to regain this lost weight, and produced the

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most concentrated urine. <u>N. mitchelli</u>, however, continued to lose weight while denied water, suffered the greatest mortality, and was less able to concentrate its urine. This latter feature is most likely responsible for the lower tolerance of <u>N. mitchelli</u> to water deprivation. <u>P. minnie</u>, though not able to concentrate its urine any more than <u>N. mitchelli</u>, survived without water as well as <u>N. alexis</u>. This somewhat paradoxical situation may be elucidated further by studying the evaporative water losses of these species.

The ability of <u>N. alexis</u> to concentrate its urine more than <u>P. minnie</u> may be a result of their longer time living under arid conditions, thus supporting Tate's (1951) suggestion of an early evolution of the <u>Notomys</u> in the desert and the <u>Pseudomys</u> in the more temperate south.

iv.

DECLARATION

V.

Sinni o cina

This thesis does not contain any material previously accepted for the award of any degree or diploma at any University. Nor to the best of my knowledge does it contain any material previously published or written by any other person without due acknowledgement.

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vi.