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ADAPTATION TO ARIDITY IN LIZARDS
OF THE EGERNIA WHITEI SPECIES-GROUP.

by

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C O N T E N T S

Page

Summary	
Declaration	
Acknowledgments	
1.0 GENERAL INTRODUCTION	1
2.0 TAXONOMY, BIOLOGY AND DISTRIBUTION	
2.1 Taxonomy	5
2.2 Biology and distribution	6
2.2.1 <u>E. whitei</u>	7
2.2.2 <u>E. modesta</u>	8
2.2.3 <u>E. pulchra</u>	8
2.2.4 <u>E. margaretae</u>	9
2.2.5 <u>E. multiscutata</u>	10
2.2.6 <u>E. inornata</u>	11
2.2.7 <u>E. slateri</u>	11
2.2.8 <u>E. striata</u>	13
2.2.9 <u>E. kintorei</u>	14
2.2.10 Note on sample sizes	14
2.3 Climate of the collecting areas	15
2.3.1 Scope and reliability of published climatic data	15
2.3.2 Factors influencing rate of water loss of an animal on the ground surface	16
2.3.3 Factors influencing rate of water loss of an animal in its burrow	19
2.3.4 Factors influencing the supply of drinking water	20
2.3.5 Climatic data for the collecting areas	21
2.4 Maintenance of animals	24
3.0 RATE OF EVAPORATIVE WATER LOSS	
3.1 Introduction	25
3.2 Method	26
3.2.1 Experimental technique	26
3.2.2 Statistical treatment of results	30
3.3 Results	31
3.3.1 Rapid decline in rate of water loss	31
3.3.2 Gradual decline in rate of water loss	32
3.3.3 Origin of decline in rate of water loss	32
3.3.4 Experiments of short duration	33
3.3.5 Reproducibility of replicates	33
3.3.6 Rate of water loss of <u>E. whitei</u>	36
3.3.7 Rate of water loss of <u>E. margaretae</u>	37
3.3.8 Rate of water loss of <u>E. multiscutata</u>	38
3.3.9 Rate of water loss of <u>E. inornata</u>	39
3.3.10 Rate of water loss of <u>E. slateri</u>	40
3.3.11 Rate of water loss of <u>E. striata</u>	41
3.3.12 Rate of water loss of <u>E. kintorei</u>	42
3.3.13 Statistical treatment of results	43
3.3.14 Significance of the value of the exponent in the equation relating water loss to body weight.	47
3.4 Discussion	49
3.4.1 Consideration of technique	49
3.4.2 Discussion of results	52

	Page
3.4.3 Comparisons with other workers	60
4.0 DIURNAL EXPOSURE PATTERNS AND THERMOREGULATION	
4.1 Introduction	62
4.2 Methods	63
4.2.1 Recording equipment	63
4.2.2 Experimental environments	64
4.2.3 Thermal gradient regime	64
4.2.3.1 Experimental conditions	64
4.2.3.2 Measurement of diurnal exposure pattern	65
4.2.3.3 Duration of experiments	66
4.2.3.4 Graphical presentation of results	67
4.2.3.5 Measurement of preferred body temperature	67
4.2.3.6 Statistical treatment of body temperature measurements	68
4.2.4 High temperature regime	69
4.2.4.1 Experimental conditions	69
4.2.4.2 Determination of diurnal exposure pattern	71
4.2.4.3 Comparison of diurnal exposure patterns in the high temperature regimes	72
4.2.5 Body weights of lizards	73
4.3 Results	74
4.3.1 Preferred body temperatures	74
4.3.1.1 Variations between and within species in PBT	74
4.3.1.2 Influence of exposure, food and water on the PBT	79
4.3.2 Role of temperature in emergence and retreat	81
4.3.2.1 Emergence at dawn	81
4.3.2.2 Retreat at dusk	82
4.3.2.3 Midmorning retreat and emergence	83
4.3.2.4 Daytime retreat in the high temperature regime	85
4.3.3 Diurnal exposure pattern: thermal gradient regime	87
4.3.3.1 Terminology	87
4.3.3.2 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. whitei</u>	88
4.3.3.3 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. margaretae</u>	88
4.3.3.4 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. multiscutata</u>	89
4.3.3.5 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. inornata</u>	90
4.3.3.6 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. slateri</u>	90
4.3.3.7 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. striata</u>	90
4.3.3.8 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. kintorei</u>	90
4.3.3.9 Influence of food and water intake on diurnal exposure pattern	90
4.3.4 Diurnal exposure pattern: high temperature regime	91
4.3.4.1 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. whitei</u>	91
4.3.4.2 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. margaretae</u>	91
4.3.4.3 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. multiscutata</u>	92
4.3.4.4 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. inornata</u>	92
4.3.4.5 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. slateri</u>	93
4.3.4.6 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. striata</u>	93
4.3.4.7 Diurnal exposure pattern of <u>E. kintorei</u>	94
4.3.5 Correlations between the exposure patterns obtained in the thermal gradient regime, the high temperature regime, and the field	95

C O N T E N T S

	Page
4.4 Discussion	98
4.4.1 Factors involved in the regulation of exposure	98
4.4.2 Intraspecific variation in behaviour	100
4.4.3 Interspecific variation in behaviour	102
5.0 GENERAL DISCUSSION	107
6.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY	116

S U M M A R Y

The Egernia whitei species-group comprises nine species, its members occupying areas of widely differing aridity in the southern two-thirds of Australia.

The adaptations to aridity of various populations within seven of the species were assessed under standardised conditions in the laboratory by measuring rate of evaporative water loss and the extent of exposure to the dehydrating conditions outside the animal's burrow or rock crevice. Both water loss and exposure varied between different populations within a species. Although the data on arid zone species were not extensive, it appeared that variability between populations was less among arid zone species.

The rates of water loss of populations from the less arid parts of any one species' range were similar. In the more arid parts, the rate of water loss was generally reduced, sometimes markedly. This pattern suggested that both genetic homeostasis and aridity control the population genotype, the former being dominant in the less arid parts of the range, the latter in the more arid parts.

There appeared to be a limit below which rate of water loss could not be reduced by decreasing skin permeability and respiratory water loss per unit body weight, and the limit was probably the same for all species. Other factors (e.g., exposure patterns) must therefore prevent the temperate and semiarid zone species occupying arid areas.

There was a tendency for the exposure of populations in the more arid parts of the temperate and semiarid zone species' ranges to be greater than exposure in less arid parts. This tendency is the reverse of what would be expected if the greater need for water conservation in the more arid parts of a species' range determined exposure, and appears to indicate that these species could not adapt to aridity by reducing exposure to dehydrating conditions in arid areas. The reasons why exposure increases in the more arid parts of these species' ranges are unknown.

In the more arid parts of their ranges, the temperate and semiarid zone species were exposed for as long as they had the

opportunity to thermoregulate - their exposure was at a maximum. The widely distributed arid zone species all showed marked restriction of exposure. Two taxa occurring in the arid zone have distributions limited to a few small localities where relief from aridity is apparently offered by high, stable burrow humidities. Both these taxa had continuous, or near continuous, exposure patterns. Restriction of exposure to dehydrating conditions appears to be essential for occupation of arid microhabitats.

The capacity of a species in the Egernia whitei species-group to adapt to aridity was constrained both by the inability to reduce rate of water loss below a certain level and by the inability to reduce exposure to dehydrating conditions in the more arid parts of its range.