

THE BENGAL MONITOR by Walter Auffenberg, 1994. University Press of Florida, Gainesville. 588 pp. Available from University Press of Florida, 15 NW 15th Street, Gainesville, Florida 32611, USA. Price: £ 72. 00.

“The Bengal monitor” completes Dr. Walter Auffenberg’s monumental trilogy of Asia’s three large monitor species, the other two being the Komodo dragon, *Varanus komodoensis* (Auffenberg, 1981) and Gray’s monitor, *V. olivaceus* (Auffenberg, 1988). Each is a scholarly work and this, doubtless the finest and a lasting contribution by a distinguished scholar to tropical ecology and conservation biology. Autecological studies, unfortunately, comprises neither the cutting edge of research nor receive the publicity now hogged by the (usually political) studies of biodiversity. Nonetheless, the heart of biodiversity being the species themselves, few will deny the importance of gathering as much natural history data on tropical species, to answer questions in evolutionary biology, to understand the conservation requirements, particularly in the case of large, distinctive and commercially valuable taxa or even for its own sake.

This book is concerned with the biology of the Bengal or land monitor, *Varanus bengalensis*, which for a long time was referred to as *Varanus monitor* in the early literature, till Sprackland (1982) showed that the older name was valid for the taxon. Our species enjoys perhaps the widest distribution among all living species of monitors: from Afghanistan and extreme eastern Iran eastwards to India (the typical subspecies), east through Indo-China, Sumatra and Java (the subspecies *nebulosus*; considered by Böhme, 1988, to warrant the status of a full species). In a map of the range of *Varanus bengalensis* sensu lato (Fig. 1-1, page 2), the author shows the total time spent in the field at each site, with study sites spanning nearly the entire range of the species (excluding of course, strife-torn Iran, Afghanistan and Indo-

China).

Walter Auffenberg is Distinguished Research Curator Emeritus at the Florida Museum of Natural History (formerly, Florida State Museum), at Gainesville, Florida, USA. A tireless field worker, Auffenberg has both collected and reported on the natural history of many tropical Asian reptiles, including his own speciality: the giant monitor lizards, in addition to his classical studies of fossil tortoises and snakes. As the tail-piece of the book being reviewed says, besides his field work, Auffenberg also made observations on the behaviour of monitors that he brought back to his Gainesville home.

The section on study areas reflects the elaborate work done in sampling the vegetation at the study sites and the determination of prey densities. We learn here that Auffenberg and party put transmitters with reliable signal recovery distance of about half a kilometre on monitors to study home ranges and activity patterns. 153 pleasing line drawings, that includes the animals, their habitats and maps, have been executed by the author himself, who is a gifted scientific illustrator.

Appendices cover local names used for the species, references to physiological processes and morphometry, abbreviations used, myths and beliefs concerning the species, and a supplementary bibliography of the plants and animals mentioned in the text that occur in Bengal monitor habitats. The Literature Cited section is 50 pages long and lists virtually everything worthwhile ever published on these giant lizards (it certainly covers everything I have seen on the Bengal monitor).

In a three page epilogue, Auffenberg summarizes the various threats to his study species and concludes that the ultimate solution for all re-

source conservation needs, is not controlling deforestation, but our own growth rate.

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