
Looking East: Carolus Linnaeus and His Herpetological Species from Asia

Indraneil Das

*Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. idas@ibec.unimas.my*

Abstract. Linnaean names based on material from Asia, indicated as from “Oriente”, “Indiis” or extralimital areas, are reviewed. This material, representing 31 species names and 29 recognizable biological species, can be restricted geographically to one of three regions—Sri Lanka, southern Malay Peninsula, or Java—although it is conceivable that some of these could have been collected from adjacent regions where these species co-occur. A number of specimens purported to be from the region have been shown by subsequent authors to be extralimital. The presumed points of origin are along trade routes in the East, where seventeenth century maritime trade (spices, timber, textiles) took place, and the vast majority of species are abundant, lowland species of such areas.

Keywords: Linnaeus, “Oriente”, “Indiis”, Asia, amphibians, reptiles.

Looking East: Carolus Linnaeus and His Herpetological Species from Asia

Indraneil Das

*Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. idas@ibec.unimas.my*

Abstract. Linnaean names based on material from Asia, indicated as from “Oriente”, “Indiis” or extralimital areas, are reviewed. This material, representing 31 species names and 29 recognizable biological species, can be restricted geographically to one of three regions—Sri Lanka, southern Malay Peninsula, or Java—although it is conceivable that some of these could have been collected from adjacent regions where these species co-occur. A number of specimens purported to be from the region have been shown by subsequent authors to be extralimital. The presumed points of origin are along trade routes in the East, where seventeenth century maritime trade (spices, timber, textiles) took place, and the vast majority of species are abundant, lowland species of such areas.

Keywords: Linnaeus, “Oriente”, “Indiis”, Asia, amphibians, reptiles.

INTRODUCTION

“*B*y the mid eighteenth century, the physiognomy of collections had changed. The millenarianist zeal to make the invisible visible by means of the curio cabinet had been transformed by a new spirit that held collections up to empirical and experimental investigations. New procedures required living and dead plants, minerals, fossils, shells, animal specimens, machines, and scientific instruments, and these were the objects that came to fill museum shelves. A new ideology of encyclopedism placed stock in displaying the expanse of natural and artificial productions, whose utility derived from their importance to human education, culture, and wellbeing.” (Pyenson & Sheets-Pyenson 1999:128)

Interest in the East, which was often to be their future empires, figured prominently in state policies of major European nations during the Age of Reason (the eighteenth century), thus named for no small measure on account of Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778). In the wake of Portugal and Spain, other naval powers of

Europe, Sweden attempted to navigate the eastern shores, the intention initially, not empire building, but commerce. The British were to eventually steal a march over the others, through the English East India Company (see Keay 1991), but the French and Dutch were not far behind. Sweden, fatherland for Linnaeus, was not quite in the same league as the aforementioned nations, in merchant marine (Müller 2009), but trade with eastern nations was of vital interest in furthering relations with them. Indeed, the Swedish East India Company (“Svenska Ostindiska Companiet”, or SOIC), founded in 1731, given a Royal Charter, and working as a monopoly enterprise until 1813 (Benner 2003), had strong trading links with both China and India. The SOIC supported several Linnaean apostles, one being Olof Torén (1718–1753), pastor of *Hope* that traversed the eastern seas to Canton (equivalent to the city of Guangzhou, in southern China) in 1748–1749, and subsequently *Götha Leijon*, which traveled to the same destination, via Surat, on India’s west coast (Franks 2005). As expected of his background, Torén collected along these voyages, and made material available to Linnaeus (Nyberg 2009).