

Wells and Wellington - It's time to bury the hatchet!

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A new year in a new millennium is a good time to take stock of herpetology in Australia and where it is heading and this is what this article seeks to do. A dispassionate look at the science, taxonomy and nomenclature as being used in the Australian herpetological scene leads to the inescapable conclusion that it's progress is being severely hampered by the general non-acceptance and usage of names assigned to species and genera by two men in the early 1980's. They were of course Richard W. Wells and Cliff Ross Wellington.

Now before I continue with my appraisal of the present, I'll step back into the past and explain how we got into the current mess.

On pages 161-198 of the 1963 edition of his book *Reptiles of Australia*, Eric Worrell published a current listing of all known Australian reptilian taxa, synonyms and the like in a so-called "Checklist of Australian Reptiles". It was in effect a complete catalogue and by far the most complete checklist of Australian herpetofauna to that date. Cogger expanded on this when in 1983 he published *Zoological Catalogue of Australia (1) Amphibia and Reptilia*, which was almost immediately accepted as the current and accepted list of "in use" names for herpetological taxa here in Australia. Now due to the size of Australia's herpetofauna (in terms of species diversity) and the fact that historically they have been relatively understudied, it was of no surprise that there were glaring deficiencies in this list in terms of well-known species being omitted and numerous taxa of different phylogenetic origins being lumped into single genera. More than anything else, Cogger's work didn't so much give a listing of the current status of Australia's herpetofauna and it's taxonomic status, but rather highlighted the deficiencies in this listing.

By way of example, the idea that all Australian monitors should be placed into the single genus "*Varanus*", is clearly not within the modern taxonomic definition of the term ("Genus") as applied to other reptile groups such as skinks, agamids and so on. Ditto for the Australian tree frogs, which while immensely variable were still anachronistically being placed into the single genus "*Litoria*". Sooner or later this would have had to be changed, as for example, had happened with the tree frogs from Eurasia and North America.

In many ways the burning question was "who" would be the person or persons who conduct

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these taxonomic reviews, not when this would occur. Now most readers of this article will be aware that in most cases one doesn't have to be a genius, or have decades of academic training to be able to work out which species are alike and which are not. In fact, most species and generic placements in zoology were made by people with relatively little, if any formal training in the given areas. This was especially true in the older days of late last century and early this century. Enter Wells and Wellington.

The "who" question was effectively answered when in 1983 and 1985, the two men published a series of papers reclassifying all of Australasia's (and New Zealand's) herpetofauna as it was then known (Wells and Wellington 1983, 1985a, 1985b). While some of their taxonomic changes at the genus and species level are either questionable and/or on the surface appear to be in error (some most certainly are error, e.g. see Hoser 2000 for examples), the inescapable fact is that in the main, most of their taxonomic acts do in fact do little more than state the obvious and make what were in effect long overdue changes and corrections to the Australian taxonomy and nomenclature. Again perhaps the best example of this is the long overdue division of the Australian tree frogs from "*Litoria*" into the appropriate genera. Now in the case of these frogs, numerous previous authors had already identified these new Wells and Wellington genera as "species groups", even in the popular literature, but without going the next step and assigning genus names to them, so these new names were not bolts out of the blue as such, but rather in effect a statement of the obvious.

The only thing "radical" as such by the actions of Wells and Wellington was that they had done the following: (a) Conducted such a huge reclassification and renaming of so many species at one time, namely they'd proposed a total of 357 taxonomic and nomenclatural acts/changes, and (b) Done the above, allegedly without consulting other herpetologists who claimed interest in and/or expertise in the relevant fields. In the case of the first, there is nothing wrong in any way with what Wells and Wellington did and there is no need for them to defend their actions. For the rest of Australia's herpetologists, Wells and Wellington had effectively hastened and short-cutted a process that without their intervention would have inevitably taken place over the next few decades anyway. In the case of the second point above, the pair claim to have consulted widely and say that they were torn between a desire to respect the wishes of others to investigate and describe taxa and the inevitable risk that people may "claim" various taxa, only to monopolize them and then do nothing for several years, which then goes against the guidelines and spirit of the ICZN's code. Wells and Wellington say they assessed each taxa on it's merits in terms of who claimed knowledge on them and whether or not they'd be likely to publish on them in the foreseeable future.

Nearly twenty years after these publications, the issue as to who was right or wrong in terms of point 2 above are no longer relevant. The names have been validly assigned and if they identify previously unnamed taxa, must be used - period! There have been a number of accusations made against the Wells and Wellington papers and the two men themselves. I won't list all of them here, but these arguments have been raised as reasons by others to

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continue not to use the names assigned by Wells and Wellington. One argument is that their descriptions have been too brief and therefore shouldn't be used. While many are indeed very brief, the fact is that (with very few exceptions) they conform to the ICZN's code at the time and thus are "legal" so to speak. More importantly the precedent of brevity in descriptions is not something the Wells and Wellington pair started. In fact numerous other noted taxonomists such as Glen Storr, John Gray, Olive Stull and others are also noted for their brief descriptions. That these earlier people were not attacked for the brevity of their descriptions, makes these brevity attacks on the Wells and Wellington papers seem a little bit hollow.

Then there's the issue that in some of their descriptions, Wells and Wellington failed to provide a proper "diagnosis" for the species they named and thus the descriptions are invalid. Wells and Wellington counter that they have covered this point in their descriptions by referring to other people's descriptions of live animals and/or photos in books and other publications. Regardless of the merits of either side, this alleged defect in the Wells and Wellington descriptions only occurs in a handful of the hundreds of taxonomic acts the pair did and so in the overall scheme of things are not terribly significant in terms of the acceptance of most of what they did.

Another grievance against the pair is the names they assigned to various species. For example naming species after the likes of Daniel Lunney of NPWS/NSW and former Prime Minister Robert Hawke, both of whom have by their actions done more harm to herpetology in Australia than most other "anti-conservation people" really was a retrograde move. Again, who could see the logic in naming a genus after Darth Vader from Star Wars?

But even then, (assuming the species named is a valid and previously unnamed taxon) we have to accept the names and use them, even though we may cringe every time we do so. And then there's the other issue of precedence. History is littered with examples of criminals and despots who have improperly leant on people to have species named after them so as to gain "immortality". And more recently individuals at the Australian Museum in Sydney has taken the retrograde step of naming species of invertebrate to whoever is willing to pay them the bucks. Image it ... *Atrax jeffkennetti* and *Atrax bobcarri*, two new species of spider that are corrupt, dishonest and highly venomous? So we cannot ban the Wells and Wellington names because the pair had a bad choice of people they decided to honour. They are again far from unique here.

In 1987 a group of Australian herpetologists anonymously petitioned the ICZN (under the name of the "President", "Australian Society of Herpetologists", care of the National Museum of Victoria) to formally suppress the Wells and Wellington names (Case 2531). A few years later (in 1991) this failed, with the ICZN ruling against the submission (ICZN 1991). Hal Cogger, who is probably Australia's most well-respected herpetologist voted against the Wells and Wellington taxonomy and nomenclature, but was outgunned at the final

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vote by the non-Australian delegates. Cogger, generally regarded as a "fence sitter" was no doubt reflecting the consensus view of most of his other herpetological colleagues at Museums and other major institutions here in Australia. While the case of the attempted suppression of the Wells and Wellington names was before the ICZN, there was a state of limbo here in Australia. No one here seemed to know what to do and it was a general "wait and see". ICZN rules state that names should be used unless and until suppressed by the ICZN, so in effect, the Wells and Wellington names should have been adopted the day after they were published (if applicable and valid), although based on the magnitude of their works, the wait and see approach was entirely understandable and may in fact have been the better course to take in the likelihood of suppression by the ICZN occurring. However once the ICZN finally ruled in favour of the Wells and Wellington taxonomy in 1991 (as in not suppressing the publications), that should have been the end of the saga, with the names coming into general usage.

However the real problem then emerged. It wasn't so much that Wells and Wellington had got their taxonomy and nomenclature wrong or that there was anything inherently evil with the pair. Rather it was that by naming so many species and genera (several hundred changes), the pair had effectively deprived dozens of academics and others of "naming rights" to previously unnamed species. History would in time show that many of these people had in effect been permanently deprived of the chance or privilege to name any reptile or frog species. We all know that the describer's name usually appears with the species name and account in almost every relevant book and other publication that is produced from the date of description and for ever more. That's the immortalization part as now being touted by the Australian Museum's invertebrate curators. And yes, we know how much of an ego trip it is for a person and/or herpetologist to see his or her name cited, recognized and given credibility in other people's publications. Thus in effect, Wells and Wellington had permanently deprived these people of that recognition and in the eyes of many "stolen" this glory and credibility.

My choice of words in the above paragraph reflects the emotions and words as portrayed in the numerous posts on the same subject by David Williams and Wolfgang Wuster on various internet forums as cited by myself in Hoser (2001). Now in defence of the Wells and Wellington pair, the same sort of thing has occurred countless times in history, so even if Wells and Wellington had done the impossible and been pure evil and deliberately or otherwise stolen naming rights for each and every one of the taxonomic changes and acts they made, this would have been an act often repeated prior to them storming onto the herp scene. Witness the countless junior synonyms for various taxa, as assigned by people who tried to rename them after someone else had got in first and taken naming rights. In many ways it's a bit like a colonial power shoving a flag on a plot of land and saying "mine". And that's what the real battle was in terms of the Wells and Wellington saga.

Now, with so many people (often in positions of influence) that were anti Wells and Wellington, it wasn't at all surprising that the inertia against using the names assigned by the

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pair was to continue for some years after the ICZN's 1991 decision in favour of the pair. It is here that I now direct my attention to some of Australia's most eminent herpetologists, whom I believe should now bury the hatchet so to speak and themselves start using the Wells and Wellington names.

When Hal Cogger first published his book *Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia* in 1975 the publication was generally regarded as being an up-to-date account of Australia's herpetofauna. Nowadays with its omission of many validly assigned Wells and Wellington names (including many which are patently obviously correct and in usage elsewhere), the book is generally regarded as being incomplete. This is in many ways a tragedy as it is otherwise regarded as being one of the better regional field guides in the world. To show how stupid this inertia really is can be seen in the lead-up to the publication of Dave Barker's book on Australian pythons. Barker called Cogger and asked him if the Wells and Wellington generic name for Australia's smaller pythons as in "*Antaresia*", was correct. Cogger said it was. Barker then asked that if this was so, then why hadn't Cogger used it in his book (see Cogger 1992). In that book, Cogger had used the old name "*Liasis*". Cogger replied that he didn't want to cop too much flak from his other herp colleagues here in Australia by going with the correct Wells and Wellington name "*Antaresia*". In the end, Cogger said to Barker words to the effect of "look, you use the name "*Antaresia*" in your pythons book, you be first and then I'll do the same in the next edition of my book." And yes, in 1994, Barker's book came out, followed by the next Cogger book in 1996, both using the name *Antaresia*.

In 1992, Mirtschin (and Davis) published *Snakes of Australia', Dangerous and Harmless* which correctly identified a Death Adder from the Barkly Tableland of the NT as a separate species from the Southern Death Adder (*Acanthophis antacticus*). However instead of using the correctly assigned Wells and Wellington name (*A. hawkei*), he merely called it *Acanthophis* sp., falsely stating that it was an undescribed species (see page 33). Now we know that the Wells and Wellington name should have been used (the nomenclature) as Mirtschin himself had confirmed that he agreed with the pair's taxonomy (that it was a different species). And based on the back cover comment that the book is "authoritative" we assume that the authors were well aware of the Wells and Wellington name "*hawkei*".

Or look at the frogs. Tyler's numerous publications in the 1990's (e.g. Tyler 1992 and Tyler, Smith and Johnstone 1994) still cling to the erroneous and untenable position that almost all Australian tree frogs are in the single genus "*Litoria*". Both these publications postdate the ICZN's ruling in 1991. The problem here is that with Tyler being by far the most highly regarded authority on Australia's frogs and him refusing to use the correctly assigned Wells and Wellington names, few if any other competent herpetologists would want to run the risk of stepping out of line and adopting the correct names. By way of example look at the recently published book *Tadpoles of South-eastern Australia* by Marion Anstis. It came out in 2002 and while it is an excellent book, it still clings to the falsehood that almost all Australian tree frogs should be placed in the genus "*Litoria*". This problem isn't just restricted

to the frogs and few snakes either.

But before I give yet another of the countless examples of the stupid and idiotic inertia against using the Wells and Wellington names, let me reiterate a key point. I am not saying that the Wells and Wellington names should be used if the person doesn't agree that they identify valid and previously unnamed taxa (and/or genus). If the person feels that the taxa is something else that was named by someone else, that name should be used. But as noted in the Mirtschin case (above) that simply wasn't the case. This was a case where he clearly agreed with Wells and Wellington's taxonomic judgement, but had somehow danced around the fact that the pair had properly named the species.

Now the purpose of this article is not to promote the cause of Wells and Wellington or their ego's by seeing their names all over the place, although this is no doubt the unintended effect of my plea for reason and an upgrading of some of the herpetological practices by some of Australia's more prominent herpetologists and publishing authors. That Mirtschin (and others) had failed to give the pair recognition by using their name for a species doesn't concern me. However what is at issue is that his book is in effect defective because a species which carries a proper name is merely referred to as "sp.", and long after it had ceased to be a mere "sp."

Then there was the case when Rob Valentic and Grant Turner ducked and weaved around the Wells and Wellington taxonomy in a paper in *Herpetofauna* (Turner and Valentic 1998). They knowingly and improperly called the Queensland black soil plains Bearded Dragon "*Pogona brevis*" (see Whitten 1994) even after I'd shown them the publication by Glen Shea in the *Bulletin of Zoological Nomenclature* (Shea 1995) which made it clear that *brevis* was an incorrect junior synonym of the correct and earlier Wells and Wellington *henrylawsoni*. The net result of this wasn't so much a case of getting up myself or Wells and Wellington, but rather the pair making fools of themselves by using what was then recognised as wrong taxonomy.

We then had the case of Rob Sprackland trying to use the anti Wells and Wellington feeling to push the Wells and Wellington name *Varanus keithornei* over in favour of his later assigned name *Varanus teriae* (named after Sprackland's wife) (case 3043) (Sprackland, Smith and Strimple 1997). To their credit the ICZN knocked that one on the head (Opinion 1970).

The absurdity of the inertia against using Wells and Wellington names was perhaps best shown in a recent news article I saw in the Melbourne *Herald-Sun* newspaper on 9 November 2001, that had been sent to them via the AAP News service. Headlined "Toads Threaten Crocs" it talked about the threat posed by Cane Toads on Freshwater Crocodiles in the Liverpool River System of the Northern Territory. Quoting crocodile expert, Graham Webb, the article read: "He said the isolated population of crocs in the Liverpool River weighed about 3 kg to 5 kg and were quite different to other freshwater crocodiles." Now I

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don't claim a greater expertise on these animals than Webb, but it is evident that he regards them as being a different taxa to the type species *Crocodylus johnstoni* from North Queensland. That being the case, then why did Webb himself and the journalist appear to dance around the fact that the species had a name? And what is it? "*Crocodylus webbi*"!

Now it is evident that Webb and others recognise this taxa as being different (thereby putting the Wells and Wellington taxonomy out of issue in this case), but due to the anti Wells and Wellington inertia they all seem to be reluctant to use the proper name for it (the nomenclature). Now sooner or later, the name must come into use. Ditto for the other Wells and Wellington names. The delays in general adoption of the names that are obviously correct is now acting as a major blockage in Australian herpetology. (Here I won't delve into the changes at the generic level for crocs as made by the pair).

In 1998 I published a taxonomic revision of Australia's Death Adders (Genus *Acanthophis*). There was nothing terribly magical in the paper or so I thought. The snakes had been put into the "too hard" basket for too long. But after publication I copped quite a bit of flack. And what was most of this for? Yes, it was for using Wells and Wellington names like *Acanthophis hawkei*. Now I was damned no matter what I did. You see, the species *hawkei* is clearly valid, and so I had no choice but to call the snake something. Usage of any other name would have been in error, so in the end I copped flack for merely doing the right thing. Of course I could have taken the easy road and called it a "sp.", but that wouldn't have been correct and either this year, next, or sometime down the track the correct name "*hawkei*" would come into general use. Also if I'd merely called it a "sp." I'd have copped flak for not assigning a name to it! (I was generally damned for naming a species of snake "*Acanthophis wellsei*", with one prominent herpetologist at a Museum asking me, "but why did you name a snake after such a dead c**t!". Now I'm not arguing with his opinion (which at that level he's entitled to ... and based on Richard Well's recent attacks on me on various matters, I may at times agree with), but hopefully the correctly assigned name won't be black-banned on that basis!).

And yes, I've lost track of the countless papers on taxonomy in Australian herps over the past decade that have devalued themselves by effectively dancing around the Wells and Wellington taxonomy by calling species named by them as "undescribed" or "sp." when it is patently clear that the authors are aware of their proper names, even by citing the very Wells and Wellington papers at the foot of their own publications. I've given a few examples above. Of course Wells and Wellington know of heaps more such cases and give just a few more in their paper (Wells and Wellington 1999) as published in *Monitor* 10(2/3).

This trend has not been universal. In his recent reclassification of the She-Oak Skinks in the late 1990's, Glen Shea used the Wells and Wellington names that Shea thought had been validly assigned to previously undescribed taxa (those Shea papers not cited here). But the fact is that currently most Australian herpetologists are unfamiliar with many of the properly

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assigned Wells and Wellington names and it appears that description of still unnamed taxa may be hampered due to this general lack of usage and information on these taxa. And/or people may inadvertently happen to waste a huge amount of time and effort and describe previously named taxa as occurred with both Whitten and Sprackland.

Commonly herpetologists and private keepers and enthusiasts have said that they are uncertain if a given taxa has or hasn't already been named by the pair and hence proper studies of little known taxa are being either deferred or even cancelled. Now what does all this mean? For nearly two decades the hatchets have been out on the Wells and Wellington pair. They have been attacked and vilified from many quarters of Australian herpetology. What I now say is that it's time for herpetology here to move on. Even if Wells and Wellington are pure evil as alleged by some, the correct taxonomy and nomenclature should be used ... we are stuck with them.

Let's bury the hatchets and stop dancing around the taxonomy and/or nomenclature that has already been effectively resolved. We should get rid of our sour grapes and use the names that should be used so that we can all move on to better things including fixing up the taxonomy here that still needs fixing.

And yes, there's still loads of taxa that Wells and Wellington overlooked for the latter day herpers to name.

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