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### Spectacular New Giant Fruit-Eating Lizard Species Discovered in Sierra Madres of Northern Philippines

*ScienceDaily* (Apr. 7, 2010) — A new species of monitor lizard has been discovered by an international team of biologists in the Sierra Madres of the northern Philippines. The new species has been given a new scientific name -- *Varanus bitatawa* -- in recognition of its distinctiveness.

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Kansas-National Museum of the Philippines expedition to Aurora Province yielded a large, adult specimen, and good DNA samples.

The scientific description of this reptile has been published this week in *Biology Letters*, an international journal published by the Royal Society of London.

According to the description, the Northern Sierra Madre Forest Monitor grows up to 2 meters long, displays bright yellow and black stripes and spots across its back, and eats mainly fruit and snails. Through the analysis of its physical features and its DNA, scientists have determined that it is distinct but closely related to two other fruit-eating monitor lizards in the Philippines. It is also different from the more common meat-eating water monitor lizard or *Bayawak*. The new species is more secretive and spends most of its time up on trees in the forests of the Northern Sierra Madre mountain range of Luzon.

Luke Welton, a graduate student at the University of Kansas

Scientists first became aware of the new species when biologists conducting surveys in the Sierra Madre Range photographed an Agta hunter with an animal he had captured for food. Several years later, the first specimens were obtained by Mr. Roldan Dugay and Dr. Arvin Diesmos, curator of herpetology at the national museum, Manila.

"Apparently the new species is an important source of protein indigenous peoples groups in Isabella and Aurora Provinces," said Dr. Diesmos. However, it was only last year that a joint University of



Scientists have discovered a new giant fruit-eating lizard species -- dubbed *Varanus bitatawa* -- in the northern Philippines. (Credit: Photo copyright Joseph Brown / Courtesy of University of Kansas Biodiversity Institute)

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and one of the coauthors of the scientific description, was one of the first biologists to see a living Northern Sierra Madre Monitor Lizard in Aurora Province. "I knew as soon as I saw the animal that it was something special," said Welton. "I had seen specimens of the other two species of fruit eating monitors, but neither of the other known species are nearly as spectacular as the Northern Sierra Madre Forest Monitor. "

Giant fruit-eating monitor lizards are found only in the Philippines. The Northern Sierra Madre Monitor Lizard is known among local Aurora Province residents as *Butikaw*. Another species, Gray's monitor lizard, is known as the *Butaan* by people in southern Luzon, Bicol, Catanduañes, and the Polillo island group. The other fruit eating monitor lizard from Panay Island is locally known as *Mabitang*. All three giant fruit-eating monitor lizard species are threatened by destruction of their forest habitats and, to a lesser degree, by hunting for their meat and the pet trade.

"We hope that by focusing on protection of this new monitor, conservation biologists and policy makers can work together to protect the remaining highly imperiled forests of northern Luzon," said Dr. Rafe Brown, leader of the team that discovered the new species and curator-in-charge of the Herpetology Division, University of Kansas Biodiversity Institute.

"The new species can serve as a convenient 'Flagship Species' for conservation, focusing the attention of the public and affording protection to many unrelated species if its habitat is preserved," Dr. Brown added.

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#### Journal Reference:

1. Luke J. Welton, Cameron D. Siler, Daniel Bennett, Arvin Diesmos, M. Roy Duya, Roldan Dugay, Edmund Leo B. Rico, Merlijn Van Weerd, Rafe M. Brown. **A spectacular new Philippine monitor lizard reveals a hidden biogeographic boundary and a novel flagship species for conservation.** *Biology Letters*, 2010; DOI: [10.1098/rsbl.2010.0119](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2010.0119)

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- APA University of Kansas Biodiversity Institute (2010, April 7). Spectacular new giant fruit-eating lizard species discovered in Sierra Madres of northern Philippines. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved April 7, 2010, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/04/100407104032.htm>
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