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A New Lizard? Well, New to Science



Joseph Brown

A 6-foot monitor lizard discovered on Luzon Island in the Philippines.

By HENRY FOUNTAIN
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The number of lizard species in the world — by most counts, around 4,000 — has just increased by one, with the announcement of a new species found on Luzon island in the Philippines.

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But this is not a reptile you'd want in a home terrarium. It's a 6-foot monitor lizard, gray with a spectacular pattern of colorful dots and other markings on its scales.

How did a species of lizard the size of a human remain undetected all these centuries? The answer is it didn't. "It's only new to science," said Rafe M. Brown, an assistant professor at the [University of Kansas](#) and senior author of a [paper](#) describing the new species, *Varanus bitatawa*, in *Biology Letters*.

Dr. Brown said the lizard, which has a diet consisting almost entirely of fruit, was known to native people in the forested northeastern coastal region of Luzon. "They eat it, and it's in their vocabulary," he said. It first came to the attention of scientists about 10 years ago through a photograph of a local hunter with one of the lizards slung over his back. But it was not until last summer that an adult specimen was obtained from a hunter by two Kansas graduate students, Luke J. Welton and Cameron D. Silar.

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The lizard is distinct, both in appearance and genetically, from a lizard of similar size found in southeastern Luzon. Unforested river valleys between the two areas probably served as a barrier to allow the two species to diverge, Dr. Brown said.

It's not known if the species is threatened, but conservation in general is a concern in the Philippines. Being so large and colorful, the lizard could inspire efforts that could protect other animals.

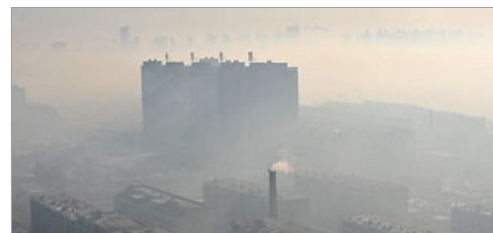
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