

The life and adventures of the lizard man

Hannah Fox

Department of Biology
Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

The outback of Australia is a vast and unknown territory that very few people have had time to explore. One man, Eric R. Pianka, a field biologist and the world's leading authority on the ecology of desert lizards, has devoted his life to such a task. An explorer at heart, Pianka saw his first lizard at the age of six and knew that he wanted to be a biologist when he grew up. In pursuit of his dream, he earned a Ph.D. at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1965 and has served as a Professor at the University of Texas at Austin since 1968. Having been credited with publishing more than 200 scientific papers and discovering the world's richest known lizard faunas, no one deserves the title of "The Lizard Man" more than Eric Pianka.

The book begins with a gripping autobiographical account of the author's adventures over the past thirty or so years. We learn of Pianka's budding passion for reptiles as a child, the tragic bazooka accident that left his leg deformed, and his time in college and graduate school, where his interest in the problem of species diversity really flourished. While working on his Ph.D. dissertation, Pianka thought to compare an evolved desert-lizard system with one he had previously studied. Little did he know, this small idea would take him to a desert halfway around the world.

The reader follows along as Pianka adventures through Australia, where he explains his experience as "a desert rat" biologist in the outback. Mastering the technique of capturing lizards proved to be the most crucial part of Pianka's experience as a field biologist. After hours of learning how to track, dig up, and pit-trap lizards, Pianka became an expert.

While reptile research was his main focus, Pianka also explored the history of Australia with an evolutionary ecologist's outlook. He describes the natural history of lizards by looking at animal temperature regulation and how this affects energy expenditure and competition. He also illuminates the importance of clutch size for lizards and what factors continue to affect this important aspect of reproduction.

A majority of the straightforward science arises when he explains the formation of Australia and how this has impacted the species of the "island continent." Long before humans walked the earth, during the Pleistocene era, Australia supported many large animals such as the gigantic varanid lizard that reached nearly ten meters in length. Now when we think of Australia, kangaroos and koalas come to mind. The flourishing of marsupials occurred because of the long isolation of Australia from other landmasses.

Pianka's journey then leads us through the bush of Australia. He vividly describes the bush flies that accumulate like clouds in the warm summer weather and the fires that frequently spark in the dry terrain. The disturbance of such fires continues a cycle of habitat maintenance that allows for local diversity. There is a greater density of certain lizard species after a place has been burned. Not only does disturbance lead to high diversity of lizards in Australia, but so does at least a dozen more factors including: nutrient-poor soils, nocturnality, fossoriality (sand swimming) and habitat specificity.

The book wraps up with Pianka's most recent adventures

to the Kalahari and Namib of Africa. While many people have attempted to halt research in Africa, Pianka contends that "the entire planet is our domain and our laboratory, and we must be given access to it" (Pianka, 1994). Such a statement is a needed reminder of how important conservation is in maintaining a diversity of species to further ecology and evolution.

The Lizard Man Speaks may seem intended for the avid science reader, but Pianka's style of writing can be understood by anyone interested in science, inside the classroom or out. The scientific information was presented in terms of an adventure, which keeps the reader engaged. What many scientific books lack is an enthusiastic narrator and that is what separates this book from the rest. There are times in the middle of the book where it becomes more technical and disjointed, but overall Pianka emerges as a natural storyteller.

This book clearly demonstrates the field applications and broader implications of classroom material for ecology and evolution students. Its insight into Australian invasive species, evolutionary tradeoffs, and aspects of competition that have allowed certain lizards to persist connects directly to ecological material and allows for further understanding of topics brought up in class. By doing away with confusing textbook jargon, this book could allow students to feel more comfortable with classroom material.

You don't have to love reptiles or understand the importance of and interest in them to enjoy this scientifically driven adventure. With an extensive reference and index section, Eric R. Pianka has written a work that can be used as a light reference or a way to pass the time. The Lizard Man Speaks effectively demonstrates that there is so much more to biology than scientists donning white lab coats, hauled up in a lab. Biology is everywhere and there is so much left to explore. Maybe it is not the biology that is the real story, but the life of Pianka and his endless passion that keeps us reading.

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References

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