

***Laticauda frontalis* (de Vis, 1905) and *Laticauda saintgironsi* n.sp. from Vanuatu and New Caledonia
(Serpentes: Elapidae: Laticaudinae)—
a New Lineage of Sea Kraits?**

HAROLD G. COGGER^{1*} AND HAROLD F. HEATWOLE²

¹ John Evans Memorial Fellow, Australian Museum, 6 College Street, Sydney NSW 2010, Australia
h.cogger@bigpond.com

² Department of Zoology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC27695–7617, USA and
School of Environmental Tropical Studies and Geography,
James Cook University, Townsville Queensland 4811, Australia
harold_heatwole@ncsu.edu

ABSTRACT. The sea krait *Laticauda colubrina* is the most widespread member of its genus, extending from the Bay of Bengal through much of Asia and the Indo-Malayan Archipelago to New Guinea and many islands of the western Pacific Ocean. Unconfirmed records of the species may extend the range to the western coast of Central America. The species is subject to marked geographic variation in a number of morphological and meristic characters that have to date defied finer taxonomic resolution.

Two members of this complex previously subsumed under the specific name *colubrina* are here formally elevated to full species status. One species—*Laticauda saintgironsi* n.sp.—consists of those populations of *L. colubrina* s.l. found around the coast and in the coastal waters of the main island of New Caledonia. The second species—*Laticauda frontalis* (de Vis, 1905)—is a dwarf species found in sympatry and syntopy with *Laticauda colubrina* in Vanuatu and the Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia.

COGGER, HAROLD G., & HAROLD F. HEATWOLE, 2006. *Laticauda frontalis* (de Vis, 1905) and *Laticauda saintgironsi* n.sp. from Vanuatu and New Caledonia (Serpentes: Elapidae: Laticaudinae)—a new lineage of sea kraits? *Records of the Australian Museum* 58(2): 245–256.

Sea kraits are typically distinctively banded marine snakes that occur from the tropical western Pacific Ocean through the Papuan and Indo-Malaysian regions to the Philippines, the Ryukyu Archipelago and tropical southeast Asia to the Bay of Bengal (Smith, 1926), while McCarthy (1986) cites the following sources for records of one species (*Laticauda colubrina*) from the Pacific coasts of several Central American countries: Nicaragua (Villa, 1962), Mexico (Alvarez de Toro, 1982) and El Salvador (in a pers. comm. from J. Villa).

The phylogenetic and taxonomic status of this group of snakes has varied widely in the literature, but in the most recent phylogeny Scanlon & Lee (2004) place all proteroglyphous snakes within the family Elapidae and suggest that the *Laticauda* group is either a basal clade within an elapid subfamily (the Hydrophiinae) or a sister clade to the Hydrophiinae (and by inference a separate subfamily, the Laticaudinae). Earlier studies (e.g., McDowell, 1985, 1987; Cadle & Gorman, 1981; Greer,

* author for correspondence