The Identification of the Holotype of *Chelodina oblonga* (Testudines: Chelidae) with a Discussion of Taxonomic Implications

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The Identification of the Holotype of
*Chelodina oblonga* (Testudines: Chelidae)
with a Discussion of Taxonomic Implications

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For a stable nomenclature to develop within any group of species it is important that common usage is justified by accurate identification of holotypes. Unfortunately it occurs at times that the holotype represents a species that is not the same as that to which the name has been applied for a considerable time. When mistakes are found corrections should be made in accordance with the rules and guidelines of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN, 1999).

The genus *Chelodina* was described by Fitzinger (1826) to apply to the Australian long-necked turtles with the type species, *Chelodina longicollis* (Shaw, 1794), being the only member at the time. Gray (1841) added *C. oblonga* to this genus. Subsequent early additions to the genus were *C. colliei* (Gray, 1856a), *C. expansa* (Gray, 1857), *C. novoguineae* (Boulenger, 1888), *C. rugosa* (Ogilby, 1890), and *C. siebenrockii* (Weiner, 1901). The two species *C. oblonga* (from "Western Australia") and *C. colliei* (from "Swan River" [Perth, Western Australia]) were maintained as separate species by Gray until his last published work (Gray, 1873). In addition, he assigned turtles subsequently collected at Port Essington, Northern Territory, to his concept of *C. oblonga* (Gray, 1844, 1856b, 1873). However, *C. colliei* was later synonymized under *C. oblonga* by Boulenger (1889) and has not been recognized as distinct since then. Later, *C. rugosa* (from "Cape York") and *C. siebenrockii* (from "Deutsch-Neu-Guinea") were also synonymized under *C. oblonga* by Wehnert (1909, 1915). This usage persisted in most subsequent Australian literature for the next half century, with all similar-appearing long-necked turtles from northern and western Australia referred to as *C. oblonga*. (e.g., Worrell, 1963). However, Mertens and Wennuth (1955) and Wermuth and Mertens (1961) resurrected the New Guinea species *C. siebenrocki* from the synonymy of Australian *C. oblonga*, and Goode (1967), recognizing that northern Australian long-necked turtles were in fact very similar to the New Guinean *C. siebenrocki*, then utilized that name (erroneously) for the northern Australian form and restricted usage of the name *C. oblonga* to the southwestern Australian form from Perth, Cogger and Lindner (1974) and Burbidge et al. (1974) then corrected Goode's usage by resurrecting the earlier name *C. rugosa* instead of *C.
siebenrocki for the northern Australian form. Since then, major field guides such as Cogger (1975, 1979, 1983, 1985, 1992), checklists and catalogues such as Iverson (1985, 1992) and Cogger et al. (1983) and numerous journal papers have utilized the name *C. rugosa* for the northern Australian form. *Chelodina siebenrocki*, if valid at all (it may be synonymous with *C. rugosa*), is restricted to New Guinea (Rhodin and Mittermeier, 1976). Current prevailing usage for 33 years since 1967 has the restricted name *Chelodina oblonga* referring to the isolated long-necked turtle endemic to the southwest corner of Western Australia in Perth. A population which represents a valid species (Burbidge et al., 1974; Georges and Adams, 1992). The same prevailing usage for 26 years since 1974 has the name *Chelodina expansa* referring to the long-necked turtles ranging from Cape York across northern Australia to Northern Territory and northern Western Australia. The name *Chelodina colliei*, originally used for the Perth population, has not been used for over 111 years since being synonymized in 1889.

John Gilbert collected the holotype of *C. oblonga* when he was in Australia in 1839. He began his travels in Perth, then went on to Sydney, and finally to Port Essington, Northern Territory, before leaving (Cann, 1998). Although it has recently been assumed that he obtained his specimen in Perth (Gray [1841] cited it only as coming from “Western Australia”), it now appears that it may actually have been collected in northern Australia.

In this paper a morphological analysis of the holotype of *C. oblonga* is reported, revealing that it is most similar to *C. expansa* from the Northern Territory and not similar to the population of *Chelodina* from Perth currently referred to as *C. oblonga*. The taxonomic implications of this discovery are discussed.

Methods. — The holotype of *Chelodina oblonga* (BMNH 1947.3.5.89; old no. [1814] 12.9.81; original no. 74a) (Figs. 1, 2) was examined at the British Museum of
Natural History (London) and compared to the skeletal material of Australian chelids currently housed at the University of Canberra and other museums (see Appendix A). Characters that had previously been determined to be diagnostic weight the former Chelodina were utilized to identify the holotype (Thomson and Georges, in prep.). Only those characters useful in this identification are described in this paper. No polarity is given as it is not the purpose of this paper to perform a phylogenetic analysis — all characters will be fully described in a later work which includes a comprehensive phylogenetic analysis of the genus Chelodina. Character terminology follows that of Zangerl (1969), with modifications suggested by Pootchar and Trebbau (1984), and bridge strut terminology follows that of Thomson et al. (1997).

Character A: Anterior Bridge Strut. — 0. Anterior bridge strut (called auxiliary buttress by some authors) does not extend significantly into pleural one. It curves posteriorly to run perpendicular to the rib gomphosis. 1. Anterior bridge strut extends postero-medial to contact the rib gomphosis at a point approximately halfway to the thoracic vertebrae. No buttressing of the natural surface present. 2. Anterior bridge strut extends postero-medially to cross the rib gomphosis at a point approximately halfway to the thoracic vertebrae and continue some distance posteriorly to it. Heavy buttressing of the natural surface present, increasing medially.

Character B: Retrakens Capitis Collique Muscles. — 0. Enlargement of the rethakens-capitus collique muscles and subsequent rugosity on the ventral surface of the carapace. This rugosity extends from a point adjacent to the first thoracic vertebra to the fifth thoracic vertebra (Fig. 3). 1. No such enlargement of the rethakens-capitus collique muscles as evidenced by the presence of rugosities on the undersurface of the carapace. An enlarged anterior bridge strut and anteriorly enlarged longissimus dorsi are also present (Table 1). In the three characters examined, the holotype of C. oblonga appears indistinguishable from C. ramosa and completely different from C. oblonga from Perth (Table 1).

The holotype specimen is identical to the specimen originally illustrated by Gray (1841), down to the details of an apparently longitudinally split fifth vertebral scute and the slight variation of the natural contacts between the abdominal and femoral scutes (i.e., the specimen currently labeled as the holotype is the same specimen originally described and figured by Gray).

Discussion. — The three characters described here can diagnose the carapaces of the two groups within Chelodina. It is apparent that the holotype of C. oblonga is not the same in the current concept of C. oblonga from Perth. It would appear that the holotype is in actually a specimen of what is currently referred to as C. ramosa from the Northern Territory, and that it may possibly have originated in Port Essington. Further morphological evidence of the distinction between the C. oblonga holotype and the current concept of C. oblonga from Perth can be gleaned from the description of C. collisi (Gray, 1856a), the next available name for the Perth species. In that paper Gray stated that C. collisi (I hereby designate BMNH 1947.3.5.91 as lectotype) could be differentiated from C. oblonga by the highly elevated marginals possessed by the former. The holotype of C. oblonga does not possess this character at all and this would indicate that Gray (1856a) intended that these be two separate species.

Since the name Chelodina oblonga (based on the holotype) technically applies to the Northern Territory form of the northern long-neck turtle currently known as C. ramosa and since C. oblonga is the senior synonym of C. ramosa, the Principle of Priority of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN, 1999: Article 23) might require a name change for the northern form. In addition, it might also be nec essary to reexamine the name Chelodina collisi Gray, 1856a, for the southwestern Australian species from Perth. However, such changes would have major destabilizing effects on current prevailing usage of Australian chelid nomenclature.

The ICZN (1999: Article 23.9) allows for the preservation of junior synonyms that have consistent usage. However, to apply this rule to the C. oblonga - C. ramosa synonymy one

| Table 1. Distribution of character states among taxa of Chelodina examined; row 1 = longissimus, row 2 = rethakens, row 3 = exoplastra, row 4 = oblonga, row 5 = ramosa (holotype), row 6 = oblonga (Perth population). |
|-----------------|-----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Char. A | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Char. B | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Char. C | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
must petition the ICZN and demonstrate that (1) the junior name (C. r-consa) has not been used by at least 10 authors in 25 publications and (2) the senior racic (C. oblora) has not been used since 1899. Since C. oblora is still currently in use and has been for 159 years since 1841, this article does not apply here.

The ICZN (1999: Article 75.6) also allows for the conservation of prevailing usage by designation of a neotype. This rule applies to a situation as described here, where the holotype of a species name under prevailing usage is discovered to actually represent a specimen of a different species. One must then petition the ICZN to use its plenary power to set aside the original holotype and designate a neotype for the species. In this case, that would require that a neotype of C. oblora be designated from a collection of animals from Perth, thereby allowing current prevailing usage of both names (C. oblora and C. r-consa) to continue, and to avoid resurrection of the name C. colliei which has not been used for over 100 years.

Alternatively, trying to maintain the species concept as originally described by Gray (1841, 1856a) but erroneously synonymized by Boulenger (1889), one can petition the ICZN to suppress the name Chelodina oblora Gray, 1841, and to place this name on the list of unavailable names. If successful, such a petition would establish Chelodina r-consa Ogilby, 1890, as the available name for the northern long-neck turtle and resurrect Chelodina colliei Gray, 1856a, as the name of the species from Perth.

Until such time as a petition to the ICZN can be resolved, the recommendations of the ICZN (1999: Article 82.1) demand that prevailing usage be maintained and hence the current name for the northern long-neck turtle remains C. oblora and that for the Perth species remains C. r-consa.

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APPENDIX A

Specimens Examined


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