

## **My Idyllic Academic Career**

Eric R. Pianka

I have been exceedingly fortunate throughout my entire academic career. Beginning in Minnesota at Carleton College, a small liberal arts school, where I majored in biology, I went on to graduate school at the University of Washington Seattle where I earned my Ph. D. in 1965. Funded by an NIH predoctoral, I studied species diversity of flatland desert lizards of North America at series of ten study sites. Several were in the cold deserts of the Great Basin in Idaho and Nevada. A few others were in the Mojave desert in California and Nevada, and several others in the Sonoran desert in California and Arizona.

A 3-year NIH postdoctoral fellowship in 1965 to 1968 allowed me to study with Robert H. MacArthur at Princeton, where I prepared an NSF proposal to extend my studies to the Australian deserts. With my ex-wife Helen, we spent 16 months doing fieldwork down under, mostly in the Great Victoria desert of Western Australia, where we found the most diverse lizard assemblages known (55 species occur in sympatry at my most diverse study area). We also discovered half a dozen as yet undescribed new lizard species (two of which are named after each of us). A. R. Main and G. M. Storr were my Australian mentors, both providing invaluable advice and support. In April 1968, I returned to Princeton with a collection of some 3,000 Australian lizards.

I arrived at the University of Texas in August 1968 and since then I have taught ecology to about six thousand undergraduates and literally hundreds of graduate students over the past 45+ years. I have supervised 21 graduate students, half of whom hold tenured professorships at major universities.

I grew weary of apologizing for the inadequacies of available textbooks, and so in 1974, I published my own textbook “Evolutionary Ecology”, which became a “Citation Classic” that has persisted through 40+ years. This book went through six editions (three publishers) and has been translated into Greek, Japanese, Polish, Russian, and Spanish. Recently I published it as an eBook in a 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Using this textbook, I developed my own signature course “Evolutionary Ecology”, which I taught for many years until 2013, when my TA was taken away at the last moment because “only 40 students” were registered for my class. Until that semester, I had always been given a competent TA and my class was well received as judged by course evaluations from students. That was the last time I taught “Evolutionary

Ecology”, since then I have been teaching a large freshman level class for non-majors “Ecology, Evolution, and Society”. I feel this is an opportunity and an obligation to educate people who will learn little biology in their lives with the goal of making them into better informed citizens of this, our one and only spaceship, planet Earth.

In 1986, I was extremely fortunate to be awarded the Denton A. Cooley Centennial Professorship in Zoology for life. Funds from this endowment have kept my research program alive for three decades when few other sources of support were available.

I have given hundreds of [invited lectures](#) at most of the world's major academic institutions. I gave the plenary lecture on the state of the art of community ecology at the First World Congress of Herpetology in Canterbury in 1989, and, at the 18th International Congress of Zoology in Athens in 2000, I presented the opening address entitled "[A General Review of Trends in Zoology during the 20th Century](#)." With Ray Huey and Tom Schoener, I co-edited a symposium volume in 1983 entitled "Lizard Ecology: Studies of a Model Organism" (Harvard University Press). In 1986, I published a synthesis of my life's research, an important book entitled "[Ecology and Natural History of Desert Lizards. Analyses of the Ecological Niche and Community Structure](#)" (Princeton University Press).

I was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1978-1979 and a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar during 1990-1991 (both these were spent doing fieldwork in Australia). In 1990, I submitted my collected papers to the University of Western Australia for which I was awarded the Doctor of Science degree. In 1994, Laurie Vitt and I co-edited another symposium volume on "Lizard Ecology: Historical and Experimental Perspectives" (Princeton University Press). Also, in 1994, I published an autobiographical account of my adventures in Australia "[The Lizard Man Speaks](#)" (University of Texas Press).

In 2003, with coauthor Laurie Vitt, the most important book ever written about lizards "[Lizards: Windows to the Evolution of Diversity](#)" was published by the University of California Press, Berkeley. This book on lizards won the [Best Non-Fiction Book Award at the Oklahoma Center for the Book](#) in 2004 and the [Grand Prize at the Ninth Annual UT Coop Robert W. Hamilton Book Awards](#) in 2005 ([Read selected pages](#)).

With the late Dennis R. King, I coedited the ultimate reference volume on

monitor lizards "[Varanoid Lizards of the World](#)," a collection of essays by over 30 international experts published in 2004 by Indiana University Press ([peruse selected pages](#)).

I was chosen as the Herpetologists League's "Distinguished Herpetologist" in 2004. In the same year, at the joint Ichthyologist/Herpetologist's annual meeting in Norman, Oklahoma, I was honored in a session organized by Gad Perry and Laurie Vitt entitled "[Ecology and Evolution of Reptiles: A Tribute to Eric Pianka](#)." Many of my students and colleagues gave papers at this session. At the same meeting, the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists passed "[Resolution of Piankafication](#)" which was published in their journal *Copeia* 2004: 989-990.

In 2006, The Texas Academy of Science named me "[Distinguished Scientist](#)." I received a standing ovation for my acceptance speech on the [Vanishing Book of Life on Earth](#), which was unfortunately misinterpreted by an [intelligent design](#) advocate in the audience (to read about this vilification, slander, and resulting controversy, [click here](#)).

With my graduate student Stephen Goodyear, we spent September-December of 2008 continuing field work at two study sites in the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia. People were surprised to find an old ecologist avidly pursuing field work at age 70. We participated in making a wildlife documentary video on monitor lizards, "[Lizard Kings](#)," which premiered nationally in the USA on PBS NOVA on the 20th of October 2009. Another version of this video, which showcased some of my research, also premiered down under on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ABC on 18 July 2010. It received several awards for best wildlife documentary.

I became a Fellow of Ecological Society of America in 2013. I was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2014. In 2015, I gave the Keynote address at the Interdisciplinary World Conference on Monitor Lizards at Phranakhon Rajabhat University in Bangkok, where I won the [Auffenberg Medal](#) for "excellence in monitor research." The Ecological Society of America awarded me their highest honor of "[Eminent Ecologist](#)" ([U.T.News](#)) in 2015. The American Society of Naturalists held a [Symposium](#) in 2016 celebrating my classic paper on Latitudinal gradients in species diversity: A review of concepts. *American Naturalist* 100: 33-46 [Download pdf](#). This paper has been reprinted in 3 books.

At 77, I am too old to take on new graduate students because it is tantamount to adopting an adult for many years – since I can no longer guarantee such a 4-5 year commitment required to finish graduate school, I declared an end to all that with my 21st grad student. Instead, I now sponsor Brazilian academics, both postdocs and grad students, which requires only one semester to a year. Because I no longer have graduate students or grants, my teaching load has been increased, a not so subtle form of age discrimination.

During the last few years I have published several important papers, including

Pianka, E. R. and S. E. Goodyear. 2012. Lizard responses to wildfire in arid interior Australia: Long-term experimental data and commonalities with other studies. *Austral Ecology* 37: 1-11.

Pianka, E. R. 2012. Can humans share spaceship earth? (“Point of View”) *Amphibian and Reptile Conservation* 6(1): 1-24(e49).

Böhm, M. et al. with 217 co-authors (one of whom is Eric R. Pianka). 2013. The conservation status of the world’s reptiles. *Biological Conservation* 157: 372-385.

Pianka, E. R. 2014. Rarity in Australian Desert Lizards. *Austral Ecology* 39: 214-224.

Mesquita, D. O., Colli, G. R., Costa, G. C., Costa, T. B., Shepard, D. B., Vitt, L. J. and Pianka, E. R. 2015. Life history data of lizards of the world. *Ecology* 96:594.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1890/14-1453.1>

Winemiller, K. O., D. Fitzgerald, L. Bower, and E. R. Pianka. 2015. Functional traits, convergent evolution, and periodic tables of niches. *Ecology Letters* 18(8): 737–751.

Mesquita, D. O., R. G. Faria, G. R. Colli, L. J. Vitt, and E. R. Pianka. 2016. Lizard life-history strategies. *Austral Ecology* 41: 1-5.

Pianka, E. R. 2016. Challenges facing today's lizard ecologists. *Journal of Herpetology* 50, in press.

Mesquita, D. O., G. C. Costa, R. Colli, T. B. Costa, D. B. Shepard, L. J. Vitt, and E. R. Pianka. 2016. Life history patterns of lizards of the world. *The American Naturalist* 187, in press.

Pianka, E. R. 2016. Challenges facing today's lizard ecologists. *Journal of Herpetology* 50, in press.