

Review

Evolution of New Zealand's terrestrial fauna: a review of molecular evidence

Julia Goldberg^{1,*}, Steven A. Trewick² and Adrian M. Paterson³

¹Allan Wilson Centre for Molecular Ecology and Evolution, Institute of Molecular Biosciences,
Massey University, Private Bag 11-222, Palmerston North 5301, New Zealand

²Ecology Group, Institute of Natural Resources, Massey University, Private Bag 11-222,
Palmerston North 5301, New Zealand

³Bio-protection and Ecology Division, Lincoln University, PO Box 84, Lincoln 7647, New Zealand

New Zealand biogeography has been dominated by the knowledge that its geophysical history is continental in nature. The continental crust (Zealandia) from which New Zealand is formed broke from Gondwanaland ca 80 Ma, and there has existed a pervading view that the native biota is primarily a product of this long isolation. However, molecular studies of terrestrial animals and plants in New Zealand indicate that many taxa arrived since isolation of the land, and that diversification in most groups is relatively recent. This is consistent with evidence for species turnover from the fossil record, taxonomic affinity, tectonic evidence and observations of biological composition and interactions. Extinction, colonization and speciation have yielded a biota in New Zealand which is, in most respects, more like that of an oceanic archipelago than a continent.

Ke words:

be taken as evidence of a dominant role of continental drift in the origination of the biota. Unfortunately, it is just this supposition that is widely made. The addition of timing of divergence is necessary to choose between the three meanings of Gondwanan.

a young oceanic island and/or a high level of extinction. Isolation ensures that only a subset of nearby continental faunas will be represented on the islands and the lack of great age of the island would account for the low diversity levels. Very commonly, the New Zealand biota is described as 'unique' and unlike anything elsewhere. [Diamond \(1997\)](#) described the biology as 'the nearest approach to life on another planet'. In fact, the nature of the biota is inconsistent with the process to which it is frequently ascribed because,

- (i) physical isolation does not equate to biological isolation,
- (ii) all biotas are unique,

Islands resemble one another in that each is unique

[\(Quammen 1996\)](#)

- (iii) species endemism is usually high on oceanic islands,

New Zealand ranks alongside island groups like Hawaii and the Galápagos Islands for its levels of endemism.

[\(Gibbs 2006, p. 12\)](#)

- (iv) distinctive taxa are common products of evolution on islands, and
- (v) disharmonic biotas are best and usually explained as resulting from stochastic colonization and extinction ([Carlquist 1965](#)).

Trans-oceanic dispersal by air and water from neighbouring continental areas and islands was thought to have played quite an important role at all times in New Zealand's history in assembly of the disharmonic fauna and flora of the Archipelago

[\(Gaskin 1975, p. 87\)](#).

If New Zealand was isolated since 80 Ma, we would expect it to support the descendants of a Zealandian biota with high diversity, complex coevolutionary associations, endemism at deeper taxonomic/phylogenetic levels and a more complete faunal composition.

(b) *Ancient lineages and living fossils*

Several 'ancient' lineages have been identified within the New Zealand biota. For example, the tuatara (*Sphenodon*)

(Baker et al. 1995; Burbidge et al. 2003). Moa are inferred as speciating after the Oligocene, even though calibration assumed that moa ancestors have been in New Zealand since isolation from Australia (Baker et al. 2005).

(ii) Harvestmen

The Pettalidae family of morphologically conserved harvestmen are found in leaf litter and have a classic Gondwanan distribution (Boyer & Giribet 2007). Despite finding that most groups within this family form monophyletic continental clades, New Zealand is home to three different lineages represented by the genera *Neopurcellia*, *Rakaia* and *Aoraki* (Boyer & Giribet 2007). Contrary to the inference of a vicariant history to explain this pattern, the levels of molecular divergence among the pettalid lineages are too low to be consistent with an ancient origin, unless there has been a very substantial taxon specific change in mutation rate. Diversity and spatial structuring on South Island mountains that are ca 5 Ma old suggest an arrival within the past few million years.

(iii) Other examples

In recent years, other examples of purported 'ancient Gondwanan lineages' have been shown to have

New Guinea and Lord Howe) (Suter 1916; Ponder et al. 2003). Despite the fact that most of these islands emerged from beneath the ocean, this distribution has

(Raven 1973), Antarctica (Hooker 1860), or northern boreal habitats) and (ii) radiation and adaptation in New Zealand during the Pleistocene glacial epoch. A third alternative can be added: evolution in New Zealand in response to the development of an alpine zone on mountain ranges that emerged during the Pliocene. In the North Island, the ranges are less extensive and even younger (ca 1 Ma) than those in South Island. The

islands (Daugherty et al

phases of Zealandian and New Zealand geophysical history ought to provide the basis for rather more sophisticated hypotheses about which periods were most evolutionarily influential. Major events since separation of Zealandia include K/T asteroid impact, Oligocene submergence, Miocene and Plio-Pleistocene climate change, Pliocene orogenics and Pleistocene volcanics.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To advance our understanding of the evolutionary history of New Zealand, we especially need more molecular studies, in an appropriate taxonomic framework linking New Zealand fauna to their counterparts in other parts of Australasia, the Pacific and the world. There are relatively few such studies of terrestrial animals but rather more to date on plant taxa. The presumption that the New Zealand fauna is captive and thus monophyletic is untenable and inappropriate as a starting point, if meaningful inferences of biological

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