C1

1

Snakes of a Continental Island

History and Patterns of Discovery of the Snake Fauna of Borneo to the Start of the Anthropocene

Indraneil Das

C1S1

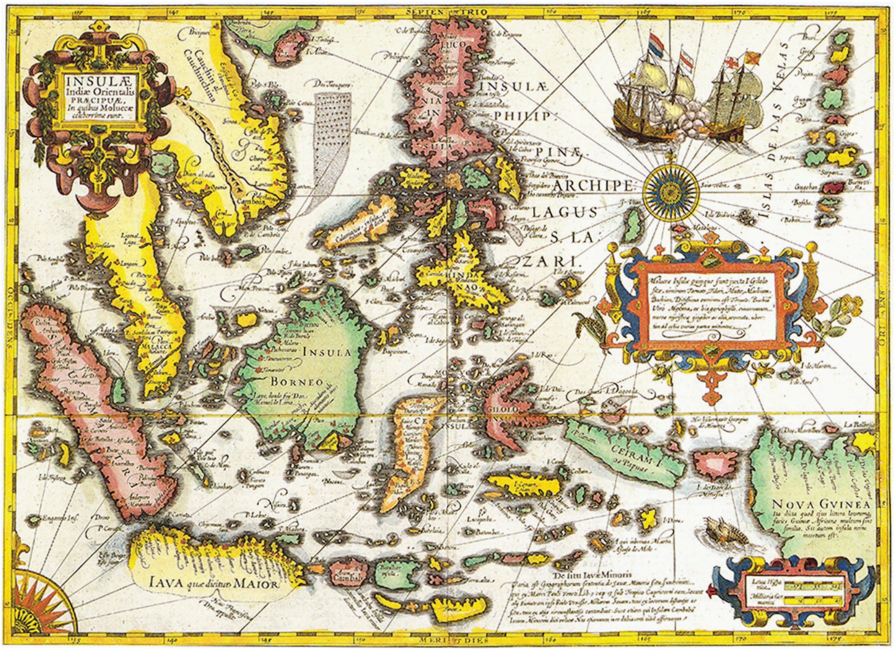
Introduction

C1P1 Its biological diversity "hidden in plain sight" (Poe 1844), the gigantic tropical island of Borneo (Figure 1.1) was known to ancient seafarers as "Land Below the Wind" (Keith 1940), yet not worthy of conquest or exploration (this was before the realization of the value of timber or petroleum). The English traveler Earl (1837) wrote that the north coast was "scarcely known even to the native trader," and it is thus unremarkable that scientific research and explorations of the island were to commence much later compared to the adjacent and smaller islands of Sumatra and Java.

C1P2 Croizat (1958) described Borneo as a geological composite. As a part of Sundaland, the island is situated on the eastern rim of the Sunda Shelf, a Laurasian continental plate. Pleistocene glaciations saw sea levels drop 120–200 m below current levels (Wang and Wang 1990), both connecting it to the Asian mainland and joining the other islands of the Sundas (Morley and Flenley 1987). Reconstructions of the region's archipelago systems during the period are in Heaney (1991) and Voris (2000). Stretching between 04°S and 07°N and from 109° to 119°E, Borneo is the second largest tropical island in the world (after New Guinea), and it covers a land area of approximately 743,380 km^2. A major part of the island falls in the Indonesian portion referred to as Kalimantan (area: 539,460 km^2), most of the balance within the east Malaysian states of Sarawak (124,450 km^2) and Sabah (73,710 km^2). Nearly enclosed by Sarawak State is the Sultanate of Negara Brunei Darussalam (5,760 km^2). Based on the hosted biota, Ali (2018) classified it as a shelf island, also being geologically contiguous with the Asian mainland, and with a shallow intervening seabed.

C1P3 This chapter describes four phases in the history of description of the snakes of Borneo, classified according to a temporal timeline that correlated with regional and international sociopolitical events and highlighting notable personalities, species, and localities.

Islands and Snakes. Harvey B. Lillywhite and Marcio Martins, Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197641521.003.0001



C1F1 **Figure 1.1** An early 17th-century map of Borneo and adjacent regions of southeast Asia by Jodocus Hondius (1563–1612), as reproduced in Gerard Mercator's (1816) atlas.

C1S2 Phase One: The Age of Linnaeus and Cabinets of Curiosities

C1P4 > Plants and animals from the extra-European world became what the science studies scholar Bruno Latour has referred to as "Immutable and combinable mobiles," objects that became portable and stable could be compared and combined, allowing for simultaneous study on a global scale.

C1P5 **—Parsons and Murphy (2012)**

C1P6 The first snakes known from Borneo do not bear precise localities (*e.g.*, *Coluber pelias*, equivalent to *Chrysopelea pelias* and *Coluber buccatus*, equivalent to *Homalopsis buccatus*, both mentioned as from "*in* Indiis," referring to either the East or West Indian Archipelagos), and are contained in Linnaeus's (1758) *Systema Naturae* (10th edition). The former (holotype of *C. pelias*) originate from Museum De Geer, the private collection of the Dutch industrialist and amateur entomologist, Baron Charles de Geer (1720–1779). The latter (holotype of *C. buccatus*) was donated to Uppsala University by the Councilor of Commerce, Jonas Alstromer, and was formerly in the Museum Adolphi Fredrici, the personal collection of Adolf Fredrik (1710–1771),