1	African freshwater eel species (Anguilla spp.) identification						
2	through DNA barcoding						
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4	Final version, accepted for publication 17 Feb 2020 in Marine and Freshwater Research						
5	Published early online 23 March 2020 https://doi.org/10.1071/MF19390						
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23	Running header: African freshwater eel DNA barcoding						
24							

25 ABSTRACT

26 Freshwater eels (Anguilla spp.) have a long and complex catadromous life cycle. This unique 27 feature, coupled with difficulty in separating species based on morphology, makes them 28 complex targets for conservation. In this study, we evaluate the utility of DNA barcoding using cytochrome oxidase I (COI) to delimit the four species of African eels found in the Western 29 30 Indian Ocean region. We collected 75 individual fin clips from the four eel species (A. mossambica, n = 51; A. marmorata, n = 17; A. bengalensis, n = 6; A. bicolor, n = 2) in the 31 32 rivers of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa during 2016 - 2018. Phylogenetic analysis of the COI 33 sequences recovered all four species as monophyletic. Barcoding gap analyses were performed 34 and found that there was no overlap in inter- and intraspecific genetic distances. Consequently, 35 the use of COI-barcoding as an identification tool was found to be reliable for identifying 36 African eels to the species level, which suggests that this marker should be included in future 37 environmental DNA or metabarcoding studies.

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39 KEYWORDS

40 cytochrome oxidase I, barcode gap analysis, *Anguilla*, Western Indian Ocean region, species
41 identification

42

43 INTRODUCTION

In the Western Indian Ocean region (WIO), Anguillid eels (*Anguilla spp.*) are ecologically important species, yet the four species found in the region remain poorly studied. Lack of reliable data has led to the species being poorly protected, with populations potentially highly threatened or over exploited (Skelton 2001; Jacoby *et al.* 2015). This is similar to temperate eel species, which have also declined to the point of endangerment (Lecomte-Finiger 2003; Castonguay and Durif 2015). African eels face a

multitude of growing threats. These include loss of habitat availability and connectivity, 50 51 changes to river flow and quality (Wasserman et al. 2011) as well as a growing harvest 52 demand, with Madagascar and Mauritius having recently entered the global eel trade 53 (Kaifu et al. 2019). African eels are the only long-distance catadromous species in the WIO region, making them particularly vulnerable to changes in river connectivity 54 55 (Hanzen et al. 2019), but also making them good ecological indicators at the catchment scale. Unfortunately, there is already evidence of their decline from the Réunion Island 56 57 where habitat loss, degradation of water quality as well as increased parasitic load have negatively impacted on their abundance and recruitment (Valade et al. 2018). Réunion is 58 59 currently the only country in the region where a conservation plan for the four African species has been implemented (Valade et al. 2018). But sustainable conservation will only 60 61 be possible through coordination with all countries within the distribution of the four 62 African species, and for most countries in the region data on eels is lacking.

63 Southern Africa's four species of freshwater eel (Anguilla mossambica, A. bicolor, 64 A. bengalensis, and A. marmorata; Skelton 2001) occur sympatrically (Jespersen 1942; 65 Jubb 1961; Robinet et al. 2007, 2008). These species exhibit complex catadromous migratory patterns and undertake facultative catchment scale migration, which makes the 66 conservation planning, management and protection of these species difficult. After 67 68 spawning in the Indian Ocean in the Mascarene Plateau (Pous et al. 2009), pelagic larvae proceed through several developmental stages into glass eels (sub-juveniles) before 69 migrating into southern African river systems. In freshwater systems, they develop into 70 71 elvers (juveniles) followed by the resident yellow eel stage (sub-adult form). Following 72 the progression to silver eels (adult or mature form), individuals will leave the freshwater 73 river systems and return to their marine spawning grounds off the coast of Madagascar to breed and die. 74

75 Eels are a difficult group to identify morphologically (Watanabe 2004; Aoyama 2009), and in particular issues have been encountered separating the African species based 76 77 solely on morphology (Balon 1975). Species identification at the yellow and silver eel 78 stage of the life cycle is traditionally done using the Ege (1939) identification key. Species 79 identification at the larval (cylindrical and leaf-shaped leptocephalus larvae) and glass eel 80 stages are more complicated as this often requires the sacrifice of specimens, which constrains recruitment monitoring and requires extensive taxonomic knowledge 81 82 (Réveillac et al. 2009).

83 Recent studies have highlighted the use of molecular techniques and data in delimiting eel species (Gagnaire et al. 2007; Takeuchi et al. 2019). A variety of molecular 84 85 markers have been used to delimit species (Rhodopsin: Rahman et al. 2015; ATP6: Takeuchi et al. 2019; 16SrRNA: Réveillac et al. 2009), but relatively few have used the 86 87 DNA barcode marker, cytochrome oxidase I (COI) (Rahman et al. 2015; Muchlism et al. 2017). DNA barcoding and the use of the 658-base pair (bp) protein-coding region of the 88 89 mitochondrial COI as standard animal DNA barcode is now well established as a 90 technique for species identification and discovery across a wide taxonomic variety of 91 species (Hebert et al. 2003; Radulovici et al. 2010). DNA barcoding relies on short, 92 standardized nucleotide sequences (DNA barcodes) as internal species tags, and rapid 93 species identification is facilitated by searchable online sequence repositories, such as the 94 Barcode of Life Data Systems (BOLD, www.barcodeoflife.org). Recent advances in nextgeneration sequencing, metabarcoding and eDNA (environmental DNA) encourage the 95 96 use of standardized molecular markers in the field of DNA barcoding. In this study, we 97 evaluated the utility of COI to delimit the four species of southern African freshwater eel. 98 The reliability of the COI-barcode as an identification tool was also tested using DNA barcode gap analyses. The DNA barcode gap is the difference between the greatest intra-99

specific (within species) genetic distance and the smallest inter-specific (between species)
distance. Overlap between intra- and inter-specific genetic distances reduces the
reliability of COI barcoding.

103 METHODS

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105 Animal ethics clearance for this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-106 Natal Animal Ethics Committee (AREC/012/017D). We sampled eels using standard non-107 invasive active and passive techniques, including the use of fyke nets and electrofishing in 108 rivers and impoundments across the KwaZulu-Natal Province (South Africa) during 2016 -109 2018. We immediately anaesthetized captured eels using standard techniques (2-110 phenoxyethanol at 0.5 ml/l) (Neiffer and Stamper 2009). Individuals were then weighed, 111 measured, and photographed. They were identified to the species level using morphological 112 measurements and observations. The identification of individuals at different life stages was 113 done using the Ege (1939) identification key with amendments by Réveillac et al. (2009). 114 The anal-dorsal fin ratio (ratio between anal and dorsal fins in relation to the body length) 115 and back coloration (for adults) or tail pigmentation (for young) were the main morphological 116 characters used to distinguish the four eel species. Non-lethal fin clipping was used to sample 117 individuals for DNA analysis. Larger adult fish were released at their capture site after 118 sampling, but given that smaller fish (< 10 cm total length) are difficult to distinguish 119 morphologically, these individuals were sacrificed and kept as voucher specimens. The fin 120 sample from each individual was stored in labelled vials containing 99% ethanol in a -80°C 121 freezer.

DNA was extracted from the individual eel fin clips using the NucleoSpin Tissue kit (Macherey-Nagel), following the manufacturer's standard protocol. A ~600 bp fragment of the COI was amplified using the fish primers FISH-F1 (5'-TCA ACC AAC CAC AAA GAC ATT

125 GGC AC-3') and FISH-R2 (5' -ACT TCA GGG TGA CCG AAG AAT CAG AA 3') from 126 Ward et al. (2005). The polymerase chain reactions (PCRs) with a total volume of 12.5 µL 127 contained: 7 µL dH20, 1 µL Dream Taq buffer, 0,25 µL dNTPs, 1 µL BSA, 0,25 µL of each 128 primer, 0,05 µL DreamTaq DNA polymerase (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc.) and 1 µL of 129 extracted DNA. The cycling parameters used were: initial denaturation at 95°C (3 min), 130 denaturation at 95°C (30 s), annealing at 52°C (30 s), initial extension at 72°C (1 min) repeated 131 for 34 cycles and, a final extension at 72°C (10 min). PCR products were then Sanger sequenced 132 at the Central Analytical Facility (CAF) at the University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa, using the same primers. 133

134 To ensure data quality negative controls were included in all PCRs and all sequences 135 obtained were BLASTed against NCBI GenBank. Similarity scores over 95% were accepted as 136 confirming species identification. All newly generated sequences were deposited in BOLD (See 137 supplementary Table S1 for BOLD accession numbers). Sequences generated in the present 138 study were combined sequences from GenBank (A. japonica: HQ339972, MH050933.1, 139 KT355033.1, AB038556.2; A. bengalensis: KM875500.1, KF182302.1, MK545096.1; A. 140 bicolor: KY618771.1, KY618794.1, KY618784.1; A. marmorata: MN067970.1, MN067968.1, 141 MN067967.1; A. mossambica: AP007244.1) and then aligned with ClustalW 2.1 (Larkin et al. 142 2007) and the alignment was optimized manually with Mesquite 3.6 (Maddison and Maddison 143 2018). Since COI is a coding gene no alignment gaps were allowed in the final alignment. 144 Anguilla japonica was included as outgroup to root the phylogenies.

We conducted phylogenetic analyses using both maximum likelihood (ML) and Bayesian inference (BI). The optimal substitution model for the COI alignment was estimated using the Akaike information criterion (AIC) in jModelTest 2.1.7 (Dariba *et al.* 2012). Garli 0.951 (Zwickl 2006) was used to perform maximum likelihood analyses. Branch support was assessed using 1000 bootstrap replicates, with consensus topologies drawn using Phylip 3.695 (Felsenstein 2009). Bayesian phylogenies were estimated using MrBayes v3.2 (Ronquist *et al.*2012). Two Bayesian runs, each consisting of four chains, were run for 20 million generations
each, with a sampling frequency of 1000. In order to check for convergence of MCMC chains,
we used Tracer v1.7.1 (Rambaut *et al.* 2008). The Effective Sample Size (ESS) values of all
parameters sampled was >200. The first 20% of trees were removed as burnin before a 50%
majority rule consensus tree was drawn. We generated the consensus tree using Phylip 3.695.
Trees based on ML and BI were rooted using *A. japonica*.

157 We performed DNA barcode gap analyses by first estimating pair-wise distances among 158 all individuals using the K2P nucleotide substitution model in MEGA 7 (Kumar *et al.* 2016). 159 To determine if the inter- and intra-specific genetic distance classes were separable, we used 160 the Jeffries-Matusita distance (J-M) statistic. We considered the two genetic distance classes 161 statistically separable if J-M > 1.414 (Trigg and Flasse 2001).

162

163 **RESULTS**

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A total of 76 fin clips from the four eel species (*A. mossambica*, n = 51; *A. marmorata*, n = 17; A. *bengalensis*, n = 6; *A. bicolor*, n = 2) were obtained through opportunistic surveys in the main rivers, tributaries and impoundments in KwaZulu-Natal from 2016 to 2018. Sampling locality details are provided in supplementary information (Table S1).

The final aligned, trimmed COI data matrix was 577 bp in length and contained no indels or stop codons. The two optimality criteria (ML and BI) recovered the same topologies and the most likely phylogeny with bootstrap and posterior probability values annotated to branches is shown in Figure 1. The four eel species were recovered as monophyletic. The monophyly of *A. bicolor* and *A. mossambica* was supported with high bootstrap and posterior 174 probability values. The A. bengalensis and A. marmorata lineages were significantly 175 supported by posterior probabilities but only moderately supported by the bootstrap analysis. 176 The intra-specific (within species) genetic distance ranged from 0 to 0.01, while the 177 inter-specific (between species) genetic distances were much higher and ranged from 0.03 to 178 0.1. The frequency distribution graph (Figure 2) shows that the DNA barcode gap fell 179 between 0.01 to 0.03, with no overlap between inter- and intra-specific genetic distances. A 180 Jeffries-Matusita distance statistic value of 1.997 (JM > 1.414) was recovered, confirming 181 that the COI sequences from the four eel species were statistically separable using the COI 182 barcoding technique.

183

184 **DISCUSSION**

185 With molecular techniques becoming more accessible, barcoding is becoming a popular 186 tool for identifying fish species and products (Smith et al., 2008; Cutarelli et al. 2014; Helyar 187 et al. 2014). The use of this technique for identifying eels has practical applications, especially 188 when it comes to conservation and monitoring of the wildlife trade. Freshwater eel species are 189 a taxon that is particularly vulnerable to changes in the environment, with populations now 190 under threat and highly traded (Jacoby et al. 2015). In this regard, barcoding can offer a useful 191 tool for rapid species identification and has been successfully used, for instance, to identify the 192 illegal trade of A. anguilla glass eels from Europe into Hong Kong (Stein et al. 2016) and also 193 to identify smoked eels species in New Zealand (Smith et al. 2008). In southern Africa, the 194 economic interest in eels is currently low, although freshwater eels probably have one of the 195 highest monetary value per weight of any fish product (Jackson, 1976) with smoked European 196 eels fetching 48 euro/kg in 2019 (FAO GLOBEFISH, 2019). Following the ban on freshwater 197 eel exports from the European Union (EU) in 2009, some African countries have entered the 198 global trade, and the endemic A. mossambica is now under scrutiny from international investors (Hanzen *et al.* 2019). Here again DNA barcoding could provide useful information on whatspecies of African eel are harvested and traded.

201 Barcode data can be used to improve biodiversity surveys and in so doing significantly 202 contribute towards filling the gap in knowledge on eel reproduction and distribution. For 203 instance, in Malaysia, some specimens morphologically identified as A. marmorata were 204 actually confirmed to be A. bengalensis through molecular techniques using COI (Arai and 205 Wong, 2016). The latter species A. bengalensis had previously not been recorded from this 206 region and would have remained unrecorded without the DNA data. As an extension of classic 207 barcoding using Sanger sequencing, metabarcoding (sequencing of barcodes from bulk samples 208 such as zooplankton) and eDNA (sequencing of barcodes from DNA in environmental samples 209 such as secreted faeces, mucous, gametes, shed skin, hair and carcasses in water) using next-210 generation sequencing technologies could revolutionize the field of biodiversity research. 211 These techniques could be particularly relevant to species such as eels that have such a long 212 and complex catadromous life cycle, where the tracking of individuals through the many life 213 stages is almost impossible. The utility of metabarcoding in eels has previously been 214 highlighted by Takeuchi et al. (2018) which developed a workflow using a 167 bp portion of 215 the ATP6 gene. This latter study did not make use of the standardized COI-barcode, routinely 216 used by the barcoding community, thus reducing broad-scale application. The conformation of 217 the COI-barcode as an appropriate marker for species delimitation for four species of WIO eels, 218 is thus, an important improvement on previous methods and also facilitates the use of public 219 data repositories such as BOLD.

While our knowledge of the distribution, ecology and biology of African freshwater eel species remains poor, the present study has shown that barcoding is a method that is rapid and cost-effective and should be considered for further studies in southern Africa. Its suitability also

resides in the fact that it is a non-destructive method, applicable to all different life stages, which

224 particularly relevant to species that are vulnerable.

225

226 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- 227 The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.
- 228 229

230 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 231 We thank the University of KwaZulu-Natal (ZA), the National Research Foundation (ZA)
- through the Foundational Biodiversity Information Programme, Umgeni Water (ZA), as well
- as the Community of Practice Grant awarded to the Center for Functional Biodiversity
- 234 (UKZN) for financial support.
- 235

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Figure 1. Maximum likelihood phylogeny inferred from CO1 sequences for the four African
eel species (*Anguilla mossambica, A. bicolor, A. bengalensis*, and *A. marmorata*). The
Japanese eel *A. japonica* was used as an outgroup. Maximum likelihood bootstrap / Bayesian
posterior probability values are shown on branches. Only bootstrap values > 60% and posterior
probability values > 0.70 are shown. Specimen numbers correspond to that provided in Table
S1. Accession numbers are provided for sequences taken from GenBank



Figure 2. Frequency distribution of intra- and inter-specific K2P pairwise distances
calculated from CO1 sequences for the four African eel species (*Anguilla mossambica*, *A. bicolor*, *A. bengalensis*, and *A. marmorata*) in the present study. Intra-specific distances are
shown in light grey while inter-specific distances are shown in black. The DNA barcode gap
lay between 0.01 and 0.03.

370 Supplementary information

Supplementary information Table S1. Summary of collection information for eel
specimens included in the present study. Specimens were collected from main river systems
in KwaZulu-Natal province (South Africa) from 2016 - 2018. Data presented include year of
collection, geographical location of specimen (latitude and longitude), river and catchment
where sample was obtained as well as the BOLD accession number.

	Year					
Individual	collected	Latitude	Longitude	River	Catchment	BOLD accession
A. mossambica 72	2017	-30.594629	29.793018	Weza	Mtamvuna	FBIPA039-18
A. mossambica 79	2017	-29.84311	30.5516	Tala Dam	Mlazi	FBIPA054-18
A. mossambica 14	2017	-29.769772	30.829056	Molweni Ronald Kloof	Umgeni	FBIPA033-18
A. mossambica 83	2017	-29.779781	30.834492	stream	Umgeni	FBIPA077-18
A. mossambica 71	2017	-29.50717	31.2285643	Golf dam	Simbithi	FBIPA038-18
A. mossambica 27	2017	-29.773137	30.798678	Molweni	Umgeni	FBIPA032-18
A. mossambica 65	2017	-28.118332	32.185545	Hluhluwe	Hluhluwe	FBIPA010-18
A. mossambica 74	2017	-30.579953	29.787291	Mzimkhulwana	Mzimkhulu	FBIPA056-18
A. mossambica 4	2017	-29.809722	30.5	Mlazi	Mlazi	FBIPA004-18
A. mossambica 70	2017	-29.50717	31.2285643	Golf dam	Simbithi	FBIPA057-18
A. marmorata 62	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA041-18
A. mossambica 34	2017	-29,1711	31.42149	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA021-18
A. bengalensis 76	2017	-28.703679	30.0487	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA055-18
A. mossambica 10	2016	-28.94142	31.39416	Nwaku	Matikulu	FBIPA009-18
A. mossambica 66	2017	-29.422257	31.25084	Palm lake dam	Mhlalali	FBIPA037-18
A. mossambica 28	2016	-29.911667	30.2219444	Mkobeni trib.	Mkomazi	FBIPA006-18
A. mossambica 40	2016	-28.94142	31.39416	Nwaku	Matikulu	FBIPA014-18
A. marmorata 55	2016	-28.925444	31.6424222	uMlalazi	uMlalazi	FBIPA053-18
A. marmorata 3	2017	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA049-18
A. mossambica 30	2017	-29.89894	30.06294	Umkomaas	Mkomazi	FBIPA070-18
A. mossambica 25	2016	-30.423944	29.9155556	Bisi	Umzimkhulu	FBIPA005-18
A. marmorata 23	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA029-18
A. mossambica 9	2016	-28.94142	31.39416	Nwaku	Matikulu	FBIPA017-18
A. marmorata 41	2017	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA023-18
A. mossambica 2	2017	-29.868727	30.780983	Mlazi	Mlazi	FBIPA001-18
A. bengalensis 24	2016	-28.3596	31.99434	Imfolozi	Imfolozi	FBIPA008-18
A. marmorata 39	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA030-18
A. marmorata 52	2017	-29.169146	31.375128	(fishway)	Thukela	FBIPA062-18
A. mossambica 44	2017	-29.12901	31.32412	Nembe	Thukela	FBIPA024-18
A. mossambica 20	2017	-29.08235	31.35244	Nembe	Thukela	FBIPA020-18
A. mossambica 36	2017	-28.904211	30.418753	Mooi	Thukela	FBIPA019-18
A. mossambica 33	2017	-29.89894	30.06294	Umkomaas	Mkomazi	FBIPA068-18

A. mossambica 15	2016	-30.423944	29.9155556	Bisi	Umzimkhulu	FBIPA002-18
A. mossambica 57	2017	-29.364997	31.290369	Nchaweni	Mvoti	FBIPA022-18
A. mossambica 21	2016	-28.94142	31.39416	Nwaku	Matikulu	FBIPA012-18
A. mossambica 73	2017	-28.719424	30.06529	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA025-18
A. mossambica 16	2016	-28.94142	31.39416	Nwaku	Matikulu	FBIPA016-18
A. mossambica 29	2016	-30.220538	30.504744		Mpambanyoni	FBIPA013-18
A. mossambica 11	2016	-28.756331	30.150376	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA074-18
A. mossambica 18	2016	-27.803441	30.247932	Buffalo	Thukela	FBIPA073-18
A. mossambica 26	2016	-30.423944	29.9155556	Bisi	Umzimkhulu	FBIPA071-18
A. mossambica 45	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA043-18
A. mossambica 48	2016	-29.170824	31.393199	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA065-18
A. mossambica 61	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA046-18
A. mossambica 43	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA048-18
A. mossambica 59	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA044-18
A. marmorata 31	2016	-28.925444	31.6424222	uMlalazi	uMlalazi	FBIPA003-18
A. mossambica 42	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA042-18
A. mossambica 19	2017	-29.161057	31.336045	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA072-18
A. marmorata 12	2016	-28.74695	31.74745	Mhlatuze	Matikulu	FBIPA011-18
A. mossambica 35	2017	-29.167362	31.335648	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA067-18
A. mossambica 46	2017	-29.167362	31.335648	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA078-19
A. mossambica 50	2017	-29.167362	31.335648	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA064-18
A. mossambica 53	2017	-29.167362	31.335648	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA050-18
A. marmorata 7	2016	-28.925444	31.6424222	uMlalazi	uMlalazi	FBIPA075-18
A. mossambica 60	2017	-29.167362	31.335648	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA060-18
A. marmorata 1	2017	-28.119305	32.183157	Hluhluwe	Hluhluwe	FBIPA034-18
A. mossambica 63	2016	-29.559913	31.174085	Tongati	Tongati	FBIPA059-18
A. mossambica 64	2016	-29.559913	31.174085	Tongati	Tongati	FBIPA058-18
A. marmorata 69	2017	-29.515525	31.2146688	Heron dam	Simbithi	FBIPA026-18
A. marmorata 87	2017	-28.23146	31.1883	Imfolozi	Imfolozi	FBIPA007-18
A. mossambica 49	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA047-18
A. mossambica 54	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA045-18
A. marmorata 68	2017	-29.515525	31.2146688	Heron dam	Simbithi	FBIPA036-18
A. marmorata 67	2017	-29.516295	31.2119255	Weaver dam	Simbithi	FBIPA035-18
A. bengalensis 78	2017	-28.715484	30.06213	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA027-18
A. mossambica 47	2016	-29.17056	31.421092	Mandini	Thukela	FBIPA052-18
A. bengalensis 77	2017	-28.710651	30.060804	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA040-18
A. marmorata 38	2017	-29.169475	31.395291	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA031-18
A. bengalensis 75	2017	-28.702976	30.054005	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA028-18
A. bengalensis 80	2017	-28.715484	30.06213	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA051-18
A. marmorata 32	2017	-28.119305	32.183157	Hluhluwe	Hluhluwe	FBIPA069-18
A. mossambica 5	2017	-29.82478	30.924995	Palmiet	Umgeni	FBIPA076-18
A. mossambica 37	2016	-30.220538	30.504744		Mpambanyoni	FBIPA066-18
A. mossambica 56	2016	-28.756331	30.150376	Thukela	Thukela	FBIPA061-18
A. mossambica 81	2017	-29.720833	30.903937	Umgeni	Umgeni	FBIPA018-18