



PHYLOGENY OF SOME MIDDLE AMERICAN PITVIPERS BASED ON A CLADISTIC ANALYSIS OF MITOCHONDRIAL 12S AND 16S DNA SEQUENCE INFORMATION

Steven D. Werman¹ (swerman@mesastate.edu), Brian I.
Crother² (bcrother@selu.edu) and Mary E.
White² (mwhite@selu.edu)

¹ Department of Biology, Mesa State College, Grand Junction, Colorado 81502 USA

² Department of Biological Sciences, Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond,
Louisiana 70402 USA

Abstract. The cladistic relationships of several Middle American pitvipers representing the genera *Bothrops* (*sensu stricto*), *Bothriechis*, *Cerrophidion*, *Lachesis* and *Porthidium* were determined using mitochondrial 12S and 16S DNA sequence information. Maximum parsimony analyses were performed using PAUP on aligned sequences that included published information for related taxa. Two sets of analyses were conducted: one disregarding gaps in the aligned matrix, and another with gaps treated as a fifth base. When gaps were excluded resolution declined, although the general arrangement of the taxa changed little. A consistent relationship was the grouping of ((*Porthidium*, *Bothriechis*) *Lachesis*). The placement of *Lachesis*, as nested within other bothropoid genera, is only partially supported by results of other authors. The arrangement of *Crotalus*, *Bothrops* and *Cerrophidion* was ambiguous when gaps were discounted. In both trees, *Agkistrodon* was basal to the New World forms. The remaining genera, *Trimeresurus* (*Protobothrops*), *Vipera*, *Azemiops*, and *Coluber*, were uniformly distant to the former taxa. Also of interest is the lack of close relationship, based on the DNA data here and elsewhere, between *Bothrops* and *Porthidium*. This is in striking contrast to results based on morphologic and allozymic analyses of previous studies. It is concluded that additional DNA sequence information from a larger sample of taxa will be necessary to better assess the phylogenetic relationships among Middle American and related pitvipers.

The bothropoid pitvipers comprise a diverse and widespread assemblage of venomous snakes distributed from southern Mexico to southern Argentina. In the last decade, progress from systematic studies of pitvipers has led to descriptions of new species and the recognition of several new generic arrangements for those species formerly assigned to *Bothrops* (*sensu lato*). Detailed species accounts can be found in Campbell and Lamar (1989), whereas the most recent generic arrangement of New World pitvipers can be found in Campbell and Brodie (1992), and summarized in Campbell and Lamar (1992).

The phylogenetic relationships among Neotropical pitvipers remain problematic. Although several studies using phenotypic character information (Crother et al., 1992; Werman, 1992; Gutberlet, 1998) and molecular data (Knight et al., 1992; Kraus et al., 1996; Cullings et al., 1997; Salomão et al., 1997; Vidal et al., 1997; Wüster et al., 1997) have been completed, many inconsistencies of phylogenetic inference persist (see Werman, 1998). Herein, we present a cladistic analysis of novel mitochondrial 12S and 16S DNA sequence information for some Middle American pitviper species, in conjunction with published sequences for related genera.

Of primary concern is the relationship of *Lachesis* to the other New World pitviper genera and the relationship of *Bothrops* (*sensu stricto*) to *Porthidium*. Among DNA studies that include *Lachesis* (Kraus et al., 1996; Cullings et al., 1997; Vidal et al., 1997) there is no clear agreement as to the position of this genus relative to other pitviper genera. *Lachesis* is either a somewhat basal lineage, or is found nested among other bothropoid genera (see Werman, 1998). Regarding *Bothrops* and *Porthidium* none of the present DNA analyses place these together as sister lineages. This is curious because Werman (1992), based on a cladistic analysis of phenotypic information, regarded them as a terminal clade of recent divergence among the New World pitvipers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Tissue samples of five pitviper species, representing several Middle American genera, were used as DNA sources. Total genomic DNA samples (that included mitochondrial DNA) were isolated and purified from liver and/or skeletal muscle tissue using standard digestion (SDS-Proteinase K) and extraction (phenol-chloroform) techniques. Microgram quantities of genomic DNAs were obtained for the following taxa: *Bothrops asper*, *Bothriechis rowleyi*, *Cerrophidion godmani*, *Lachesis muta*, and *Porthidium nasutum*. Locality data and voucher information are available on request from the authors.

Amplifications were carried out in a Thermolyne Amplitron thermal cycler utilizing established protocols with modifications specific for pitvipers (Knight and Mindell, 1993). Symmetrical amplification of the 12S sequences was accomplished with the L strand primer, 5'-AAACTGGGATTAGATACCCCACTAT-3', and the H strand primer, 5'-GTACACTTACCTTGTTACGACTT-3'. The 16S sequences were amplified with the L

strand primer, 5'-CGCCTGTTTATCAAAAACAT-3', and the H strand primer, 5'-CCGGTCTGAACTCAGATCACGT-3' (Knight and Mindell, 1993). The cycle parameters for the 12S and 16S sequences were: 85° C, 5 min, followed by 30 cycles of 94° C, 35 sec; 50° C, 35 sec; 72° C, 1 min; with an extension on the last cycle of 72° C, 5 min, then 4° C, dwell/soak. The amplifications resulted in approximately 960 bp for the combined 12S and 16S gene fragments.

Amplification products were either purified or ligated directly into *Invitrogen* pCR II TA cloning vectors following *Invitrogen* specific protocols. Ligation products were transformed into *Invitrogen* "One Shot" competent cells and plated on LB/Amp/X-gal media for colony selection. Plasmid DNAs were isolated from positive colonies using 5 *Prime-3Prime* "Perfect prep" miniprep kits. Purified plasmid DNAs were digested with EcoRI, to release the inserts, and size fractionated on 2% agarose gels. Plasmids positive for 12S and 16S inserts were collected and stored at -70° C.

Sequencing effort included standard dideoxynucleotide termination methods (Sanger et al., 1977; Hillis et al., 1996) using CircumVent thermal cycle DNA sequencing kits (New England Biolabs) in combination with chemiluminescent Photorotope detection kits (NEB). In addition, sequences were also determined with an automated Applied Biosystems Inc. (ABI) Prism DNA sequencer. In both cases, standard M13 forward and reverse sequencing primers were used. Sequences were determined by comparing both forward and reverse sequencing reactions. Approximately 410 nucleotide positions of the 12S gene and 550 nucleotide positions for the 16S gene were scored (e.g., 410 and 548 for *P. nasutum* 12S and 16S, respectively).

Partial 12S and 16S DNA sequences for *Coluber constrictor*, *Vipera ammodytes*, *Azemiops feae* and *Agkistrodon bilineatus* were obtained from Knight and Mindell (1993). 12S sequence information for *Trimeresurus (Protobothrops) mucrosquamatus* was obtained from Genbank, accession # D31613 (Eguchi, unpublished, 1994). 12S and 16S sequences for *Crotalus aquilus* were also obtained from Genbank under the accession numbers L14373 and L14374, respectively (Knight et al., 1993). These six taxa were used for outgroup comparisons and rooting purposes in the cladistic analyses.

Sequence alignments were accomplished by eye using a color coding scheme specific for each nucleotide. Insertions and deletions in the sequence matrix generated 975 total characters. Aligned sequences were subjected to phylogenetic analysis using PAUP, version 3.1.1 (Swofford, 1993). Maximum parsimony (MP) analyses were performed using random addition of sequences, tree-bisection-reconnection branch swapping, the MULPARS option with ACCTRAN optimization. Gaps were either treated as a fifth base or as missing information in the data matrix. Characters were not weighted. Unknown nucleotide information was designated as "n" and treated as missing information. Strict consensus trees were retained for multiple MP solutions. Bremer support values (Bremer, 1994), that identify how many extra steps on a particular branch are necessary to collapse the branch in a consensus tree of proximate parsimonious solutions, were used to assess nodal stability. Two analyses were performed: the first with gaps

included as character information and a second where gaps were discounted. The rationale for these analyses was to determine the effect of gaps on cladogram resolution.

RESULTS

The MP analysis for all taxa, with gaps included, resulted in a single parsimonious solution ([Figure 1](#)) with a tree length of 403 steps and a consistency index (CI) of 0.556, homoplasy index (HI) of 0.444, retention index (RI) of 0.399 and a rescaled consistency index (RC) of 0.222. Two terminal sister clades included ((*Porthidium*, *Bothriechis*) *Lachesis*) and ((*Bothrops*, *Crotalus*) *Cerrophidion*) with proximal and distal lineages being *Agkistrodon* and *Trimeresurus*, respectively. These taxa are rooted proximally by a clade composed of *Azemiops* and *Vipera* and distally by *Coluber*. Bremer support values were strongest for the *Porthidium-Bothriechis* grouping (9) and the relationship of *Lachesis* to these two taxa (6).

When gaps were discounted as characters, an analysis of all taxa resulted in five equally parsimonious solutions all with 343 steps, a CI of 0.528, HI of 0.472, RI of 0.377 and a RC of 0.199. One of these solutions as well as a strict consensus tree of the five solutions is shown in [Figure 2](#). At the terminus of this tree is a clade composed of ((*Porthidium*, *Bothriechis*) *Lachesis*) with sister relations to a trichotomy that includes *Bothrops*, *Cerrophidion* and *Crotalus*. Below this group and proximal to a polychotomy of *Trimeresurus*, *Azemiops*, *Vipera* and *Coluber*, a lineage represented by *Agkistrodon* diverges. Bremer support values are strongest for the *Porthidium-Bothriechis* grouping (5) and the sister group relation of *Lachesis* (4) to these former taxa.

DISCUSSION

In spite of several recent attempts to ascertain the phylogenetic relationships of pitvipers many species relationships remain unresolved (reviewed in Werman, 1998). Character information that includes morphology (Werman, 1992; Crother et al., 1992; Gutberlet, 1998), allozymes (Werman, 1992; Crother et al., 1992) and several mitochondrial gene sequences (Kraus et al., 1996; Cullings et al., 1997; Salomão et al., 1997), exists for many taxa, but a stable phylogeny for pitvipers remains elusive (Werman, 1998). In spite of the general lack of congruence among diverse studies conducted previously, some patterns are emerging to which our present analyses offer support.

It is clear from [Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#), and Knight and Mindell (1993) that *Coluber*, *Vipera* and *Azemiops* are basal to the pitvipers. However, in our analysis, when gaps are included as character information, *Azemiops* clusters

with *Vipera*, and *Coluber* represents the earliest divergent lineage. This arrangement is not in complete agreement with that of Knight and Mindell (1993). They suggested that *Azemiops* is a sister lineage to *Agkistrodon*, relative to *Vipera* and *Coluber*, and thus may well represent the sister group to all pitvipers. Kraus et al. (1996) found *Azemiops* to be basal to the pitvipers, although in some cases *Causus* was a closer sister group to the crotalines. In the present study, when gaps are removed from consideration, these genera are not resolved based on a consensus for equally parsimonious solutions (Figure 2). In addition, there remains little doubt that *Trimeresurus* (*Protobothrops*) is outside the New World pitviper radiation. This conclusion is supported by several other studies (e.g., Kraus et al., 1996; Salomão et al., 1997; Vidal et al., 1997). Furthermore, our study (Figure 1 and Figure 2) indicates that New World *Agkistrodon* is a basal lineage among the New World genera. This was also reported by Werman (1992) although conflicting interpretations based on DNA evidence exist (Kraus et al., 1996; Vidal et al., 1997).

Within the Middle American genera, the 12S and 16S sequence information suggests that *Porthidium* and *Bothriechis* are sister taxa (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This arrangement, based on Bremer support values, is robust. In addition, *Lachesis* emerges as a sister lineage to the former two genera. This is a curious result because no other gene sequence analysis to date supports a close relationship between *Porthidium* and *Bothriechis*; also *Lachesis* has rarely been placed close to the former two taxa. For example, Werman (1992) showed a monophyletic relationship among *Bothriechis*, *Porthidium* and *Bothrops*, but depicted *Lachesis* as a lineage of early divergence in relation to Middle American pitvipers. Consequently, the relationship of *Bothriechis* to *Porthidium* represents yet another systematic hypothesis to be tested by future study. The relationship of *Lachesis* to other New World pitvipers remains problematic and both previous and present DNA analyses offer little to resolve the position of this interesting genus.

The relationships of *Bothrops*, *Cerrophidion* and *Crotalus* are unclear, although they appear basal in divergence among New World pitvipers. They either comprise a sister group to the above pitviper genera (Figure 1) or an unresolved trichotomy when gaps are treated as missing data (Figure 2). The basal placement of *Cerrophidion* is supported by Knight et al. (1992) and Werman (1992), whereas a basal placement for *Crotalus* is supported by Werman (1992) and Salomão et al. (1997).

Werman (1992) found a close affinity between *Bothrops* and *Porthidium* in a cladistic analysis of morphology and allozymes. He hypothesized that these taxa constituted a clade of recent divergence, relative to other New World pitviper genera with similar and presumably derived cranial features (Werman, 1992, 1998) and allozymes (Werman, 1992, 1997). This sister relationship was further supported by an in-depth phylogenetic analysis of morphological characters of many bothropoid genera by Gutberlet (1998). The close relationship of *Bothrops* and *Porthidium* is not supported by the present analysis or other DNA studies (e.g., Kraus et al., 1996). Although addressed in detail in Werman (1998), it is apparent that the analyses of morphologic and allozymic information are discordant with respect to the DNA analyses. Either the phenotypic data

are strongly convergent or the DNA sequence data are not rigorous nor voluminous enough to allow for accurate phylogenetic reconstructions. Surely, more DNA sequence information is necessary to resolve the relationship between *Bothrops* and *Porthidium*, as well as the relationships among other New World pitviper genera. However, we suspect that the incongruences among data sets may simply reflect the disjoint evolutionary nature of mitochondrial DNA with respect to the nuclear genome. Perhaps an exploration of the latter will allow for further resolution of the relationships among these interesting snakes.

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APPENDIX

Character matrix of aligned (L-strand) mitochondrial 12S and 16S DNA sequence information. The following abbreviations are: C- *Coluber constrictor*, AZ- *Azemiops feae*, V- *Vipera ammodytes*, AG- *Agkistrodon bilineatus*, N- *Porthidium nasutum*, R- *Bothriechis rowleyi*, L- *Lachesis muta*, CE- *Cerrophidion godmani*, AS- *Bothrops asper*, CR- *Crotalus aquilus*, T- *Trimeresurus mucrosquamatus*. Asterisks indicate the start of the 12S and 16S sequences. Missing information is designated by "n", gaps by "-".

*12S

50

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C nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnncaatcaaattaccaattggttngnnaaataactac
AZ nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnncaattaaaccaccaattggttcgccaacaactac
V nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnncaattaaactactaattggttcgccaacaactac
AG nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnncaattaaattaccaattggttcgccaacaactac
N gcctagccacaacaacaattaactaccaattggttcgccaacaactac
R gcccaaccgtaacacacaattaattaccaattggttcgccaacaactac
L gcctagccgtaacaggaattaataccaattggttcgccaacaactac
CE gcctaaccgtaacacgcaattaaccaccaattggttcgccaacaactac
AS gcctagc-aaaacacgcaattaactaccaattgcccgcgaacaactac
```


CR nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnncaattaaaccaccaattgtccgccaacaactac
T nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnttcacaattgtccaacaacaactac

100

C gagtaaagacttaaaattttaaagacttgacgggtacctcataacaaccta
AZ gagtaataacttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtgcttcatcacaaccta
V gagtagtaacttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtgcttcatcacagccta
AG gagta-ta-cttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtgcttcaccacgccta
N gagccata-cttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtacttcatcacacccta
R gagtcca-cttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtacttcaccacgccta
L gagtcaca-cttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtacttcaccacgccta
CE gagtcata-cttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtacttcaccacgccta
AS gagttaa-cttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtacttcaccacacccta
CR gagttaca-cttaaaactttaaagacttgacgggtgcttcaccacgccta
T gagttaca-cttaaaactgaaaagacttgacgggtacttcaccacaaccta

150

C gaggagcctgtcaaataaccgatactccacgattaacccaacctccccta
AZ gaggagcctgtctaacaaccgacaacccacgattaacccaaccttttctt
V gaggagcctgtctaacaaccgacaacccacgtttaaccccgccccttctt
AG gaggagcctgtccaacaaccgataatccacgattaacccaacccccctctt
N gaggagcctgtctaataaccgacaacccacgattaacccaacccccctcctt
R gaggagcctgtctaacaaccgacaacccacgattaacccaaccccccttctt
L gaggagcctgtccaataaccgacaacccacgattaacccgaccccccttcta
CE gaggagcctgtctattaaccgacaacccacgattaacccagcctcccctc
AS gaggagcctgtccaataaccgacgacccacgattaacccagccccccctt
CR gaggagcctgtctagtaaccgataatccacgattaacccagccccctctg
T gaggagcctgtctaataaccgataatccacgattaatctcacccttttctt

200

C gccttaacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtgaaagaaac
AZ gcc--aacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaaagaaat
V gcc--aacagctctatataaccgccgtcgcaagcctaccttgtaaagagtttt
AG gcc--aacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaaagaaat
N gcccacacagcctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaaagaaat
R gcctg-acagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaagaaaa
L gccc-aacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaaagaaat
CE gccc-aacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaaagaagt
AS gcc--aacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctacctcctaagagaaat
CR gcc-taacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaaagaaat
T gccc-aacagctctatataaccgccgtcgccagcctaccttgtaaaagaaat

250

C aaagtgagctaaatagccgccacactaacacgacaggtcgaggtgtaact
AZ atagtgagctaaatagtactg-cactaaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaacc
V aaagtgagctacaaagttgtcacacttaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaacc
AG aaagtgagctaaatagtactaacactaaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaact
N aaagtagactaaacagtatcat-actaaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtagct
R aaagtatgccaaatag---caccactaacacgacaggtcgaggtgtaact
L aaagtaagccaaatagtatt-tcactaaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaact
CE aaagtaggctaaacagta-ccacactaaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaact
AS aaagtaggccaacagtaacccgactaaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaact
CR aaagtaagctaaatagca-ccacacttaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaact
T aaagtaagccaaacagtactg-cactaaaacgacaggtcgaggtgtaacc

300

C tatgggaaggaccatgatgggctacattttctaaaacagaaaacacgaat
 AZ aatgaaaaggatcaagatgggctacatttctcctgacccgagaatacgaat
 V catgagggggacaaagatgggctacatttctc-taaccagagaacacgaat
 AG catgaagggg-ctaagatgggctacatttctcc--aaccgagaatacgaac
 N tatggaggggaccaagatgggctacatttctcc--aactgagcacacgaac
 R tatggaggggcccgaagatgggctacatttctc---aaccgagcatacggac
 L tatgaagagg-tcaagatgggctacatttctcc--aaccgagaatacgaac
 CE catggggaggactaagatgggctacatttctcc--aaccaagaatacggat
 AS catgagggcgaccagatgggctacactctcac-acccgagaatacggaa
 CR aatgagagggactaagatgggctacatttctctt-atccgagaatacgaac
 T aatgaaaggggctaaagatgggctacatttctcc--aaccgagaatacgaac

350

C aa-actatgaaa-taagaaactgaaggcggttagcagtaaaactaagaa
 AZ aacactatgaaaattagtgcttgaaggcggttagcagtaagataagaa
 V ctcactatgaaatg-gtgactgaaggaggatttagcagtaagataagaa
 AG aacactatgaaact-agtctttaaaggcggttagcagtaagataagaa
 N aacactatgaaact-agtctttaaaggcggttagcagtaagataggaa
 R aacactatgaa-cttagtctttaaaggcggttagcagtaagataggaa
 L aacactacgaaact-agtctttaaaggcggttagcagtaagctaggaa
 CE aacactatgaaa-ttagtctttaaaggcggttagcagtaagataagaa
 AS aatactacgaaa-ttagtctttaaagggtgggttagcagtaagggtgggaa
 CR aatactatgaaa-ttagtggtttaaaggcggttagcagtaagataagaa
 T agcactatgaaa-caagtgcccgagggcggttagcagtaagataagaa

400

C ctaaatacctagtgcgaaaccaatgcaatgaggtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 AZ taaaanacttaactgaanataatagcaatgaagtgcggtncacaccgcccg
 V taaaataccttaactgaacattaagcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 AG taaaangcttaactgaacataacgcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 N taaaacacctaactggacataacgcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 R taaaatacctaactggacataacgcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 L tagaatacctaactgaacataatcgcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 CE taaaatacctaactgaacataacgcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 AS taaaacacccaactgaacataacgcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 CR taaaanacttaactgaacataacgcaatgaagtgcggtacacaccgcccg
 T taaaacacttaactgtacacaacnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn

***16S**

450

C catccctgtcnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn
 AZ catccctgccnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn
 V catccctgccnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn
 AG catccctgccnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn
 N catccctgctaactacaactctttatctt-aa-taaacca-ctaacaaaa
 R catcccttc-accacaaca-taa-cctt-aactaaaccaactattaaaat
 L catccctg--accacaatacctaaaa-tt-aaataaaactaaccaaataa-
 CE catccctgcccaccacaactaaacctt-aa-taaacc-attaaattaaa
 AS catccctgctaaccacacaactaaacctt-aa-taaac-aaccaaaataa
 CR caccctgtnn
 T nnn

500

C nnn
 AZ nnn
 V nnn
 AG nnn
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L -tcaaccaggggcaaccttttagctaaacaagtattaacggcaacgcctgcc
CE gccaacaggggcaaccttttagccaaacaagtattaaggcaacgcctgcc
AS -ccaaacaggggcaaccttttagccaaacaagtattaaggcgacgcctgcc
CR nnn
T nnn

550

C nnn
AZ nnn
V nnn
AG nnn
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L cagtgaaaa-ttaaaccggccgcggtaccctaaccgtgcaaaggtagcata
CE cagtgaaaaattaaaccggccgcggtaccctaaccgtgcaaaggtagcata
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CR nnn
T nnn

600

C nnn
AZ nnn
V nnn
AG nnn
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L atcatttgtctattaattgtagacctgtatgaaaggcaaaatgagag-cc
CE atcatttgtctattaattgtagacctgtatgaaaggcaaaatgagag-cc
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CR nnn
T nnn

650

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T nnn

700

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T nnn

750

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T nn

800

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AG aagaacttccaa-tata-tgaattcc-tccataaaaaccaaggcgacaag
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T nn

850

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T nn

900

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AG taacagcgcatacttcttcaagagcccatatcaaaaagaaggtttacgac
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T nn

950

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T nnn

975

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T nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn

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