

# Taxonomic re-evaluation of the non-native cichlid in Portuguese drainages

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## SUMMARY

A non-native cichlid fish firstly reported in Portugal in 1940 was originally identified as *Cichlasoma facetum* (Jenyns 1842) based on specimens reported from "Praia de Mira" (Vouga drainage, northwestern Portugal). Currently, the species is known only from three southern Portuguese river drainages, namely Sado, Arade and Guadiana, and no other record has been made from Praia de Mira or the Vouga drainage since the original record. The genus *Cichlasoma* has since suffered major taxonomic revisions: *C. facetum* has been considered a species-complex and proposed as the new genus *Australoheros*, including many species. Given the current taxonomic rearrangement of the *C. facetum* species group, we performed a taxonomic re-evaluation of species identity of this non-native cichlid in Portuguese drainages using morphological and molecular analyses. Morphological data collected on specimens sampled in the Sado river drainages confirmed the identification as *Australoheros facetus*. Moreover, nucleotide sequences of the cytochrome b gene obtained from specimens from Sado, Arade and Guadiana showed the existence of a single haplotype across drainages, which was 100% identical to *A. facetus* specimens collected in native Argentinean waters (i.e. Uruguay River). The current non-native distribution range of the species in Portugal results from human-mediated introductions across the southern drainages.

**Keywords:** Non-native fish, Cichlids, Taxonomic identification, Morphology, Cytochrome b

**Citation:** Carecho J, Baduy F, Guerreiro PM, Saraiva JL, Ribeiro F, Veríssimo A (2018) Taxonomic re-evaluation of the non-native cichlid in Portuguese drainages. *Fishes in Mediterranean Environments* 2018.001: 12p. <https://doi.org/10.29094/FiSHMED.2018.001>

## INTRODUCTION

Non-native species, and particularly those that become invasive, are considered one of the major global threats to biodiversity, only surpassed by habitat loss and fragmentation (Mack et al. 2000; Clavero & García-Berthou, 2005; Gallardo et al., 2016). Recent estimates suggest that over 12 000 non-native species are currently present within European Union borders, of which around 10–15% are invasive (Sundseth, 2014). The economic consequences of biological invasions are remarkable and amount to about €12 billion/year over the past 20 years; yet, this amount is expected to increase considering the increasing rates of new introductions (Sundseth, 2014; Genovesi et al., 2015).

Among vertebrates, freshwater fishes are the most widely introduced species globally and comprise the best-studied group regarding invasion impacts (Rahel, 2002; Leprieur et al., 2008; Strayer, 2010). Not surprisingly, non-native fishes are considered one of the major global causes of decline in aquatic biodiversity (Cowx, 1998; Helfman, 2007). This is of particular concern within the Mediterranean biodiversity hotspot, where many regions show high levels of aquatic endemism, namely freshwater fishes (Myers et al., 2000; Smith & Darwall, 2006).

The Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and Spain) is a notable example of the current situation in Mediterranean freshwater ecosystems: non-native freshwater fish (NNFF) records are among the highest within the Mediterranean basin although the region hosts a large number of endemic freshwater fish species (Elvira & Almodóvar, 2001; Ribeiro et al., 2009). A recent revision indicated over 30 NNFF within Iberian drainages (Marr et al., 2013), and this number has since increased (e.g. Aparício, 2015; Ribeiro et al., 2015). Indeed, estimates of one new species every two years have been made for Portuguese freshwater ecosystems alone (Ribeiro et al., 2009; Ribeiro, F. unpublished data).

The Iberian NNFF include a single cichlid species, representing the oldest Neotropical ornamental fish brought alive to Europe, in 1889 (Říčan & Kullander, 2006). The first record of this cichlid in Portugal, originally identified as *Cichlasoma facetum* (Jenyns 1842), refers to specimens deposited in the Museum of Zoology of the University of Coimbra (Catalog no.s ZOO5459-5462; Figure 1). However, this record raises several questions regarding the original capture location of the specimens, as it includes four cichlid fish plus an incorrectly identified specimen of the marine fish genus *Balistes* (Catalog no. ZOO6567), reported from Mira - Praia (Figure 1), on the Atlantic coast. The presence of *Balistes* mixed in with the cichlid fishes is confusing as it invokes a marine environment as the capture location, further suggested by the mention of “Mira – Praia” (Mira Beach). However, the same record also mentions “Viveiros e Valas” (i.e. hatchery and drainage channels), alluding to the hatchery facilities at Praia de Mira (“Posto Aquícola de Praia de Mira”), a government facility from the General Forestry Directorate, that was closed down in 1980s. This hatchery facility was dedicated to acclimatize and promote the introduction of “warm” water freshwater fishes (Bochechas, J. personal communication).

In addition to the current ambiguous collection locality of the original record of *C. facetum* in Portugal, the genus *Cichlasoma* has since undergone major taxonomic revisions, and many of its species were left without a generic name until 2016 (Říčan et al., 2016). In particular, the *Cichlasoma facetum* group was thoroughly revised and the new genus *Australoheros* was proposed including several species (Říčan & Kullander, 2006, 2008; Říčan et al., 2011). Despite the recent taxonomic re-arrangement of *C. facetum*, no study has critically evaluated the species identity of the non-native cichlid species in Portuguese waters although many authors have assumed it corresponds to *Australoheros facetus* (e.g. Ribeiro et al., 2007; Baduy et al., 2016).

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**DOI: 10.29094/FiSHMED.2018.001**

Given the ambiguity surrounding the first record of *C. facetum* in Portugal and the recent taxonomic re-arrangement of this particular taxon, this study aims to re-evaluate the species identification of the non-native cichlid fish present in Portu-

guese drainages. To this end, we conducted morphological and molecular analyses on a sample of fish specimens collected in all major Portuguese drainages where the species is currently known to occur.



**Figure 1.** Above, specimens associated with the original first record of *Australoheros facetus* (= *Cichlasoma facetum*) (Jenyns 1842), deposited in the Museum of Zoology of the University of Coimbra, together with a specimen of the genus *Balistes* (first from left), collected on October 13<sup>th</sup> 1940 by Helmut Helling at Mira – Praia, Viveiros (Portugal). Below, detail photographs of specimens ZOO5462 (left) and ZOO5461 (right).



## METHODS

Specimens were sampled through electric fishing in the Sado, Arade and Guadiana drainages (Figure 2), following protocols described in Ribeiro et al. (2007). Twenty whole fish (standard length: 37 – 80 mm) from Ribeira de Corona, Sado drainage (38.0265°N, 8.4315°W), were collected and kept frozen until morphological analysis. Morphological identification to the family-, genus- and species-levels was based on external morphological characters and taxonomic descriptions and/or keys described in Nelson et al. (2016) and in Říčan & Kullander (2006, 2008), respectively. Total and standard length were measured to the nearest millimeter, and meristics included scale counts on the upper and lower lateral lines, and on the first epaxial longitudinal series of scales (E1, *sensu* Figure 1 from López-Fernández & Taphorn 2004), as well as dorsal and anal fins pines and rays. All meristic counts were made under a dissecting scope. Fin clips were collected from a total of 41 specimens from the Sado, Arade and Guadiana drainages (Table 1), and preserved in 96% ethanol for molecular genetic analysis.

Genomic DNA was extracted using the EasySpin® Genomic DNA Miniprep Tissue Kit (Citomed, Lisbon, Portugal) following the manufacturer's instructions. A fragment of the cytochrome *b* gene (~1200 bp) was amplified via the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) with the primers GLuDG.L-TGACTTGAARAACCAAYCGTTG (Palumbi et al., 1991) and H15915-AACTGCAGTCATCTCCGGGTTACAAGAC (Irwin et al., 1991). Each sample was amplified in 10 µl reactions including 5 µl of MyTaq 2x Hot Start (BIOLINE), 0.4 µl of each primer (10 µM), 1 µl of gDNA and 3.2 µl of dH<sub>2</sub>O. The PCR temperature profile included an initial denaturation at 94°C for 5 min, followed by 30 cycles with denaturation at 94°C for 1 min, primer annealing at 48°C for 40s, and extension at 72°C for 1 min, with a final extension step at 72°C for 5 min. Successful amplification was confirmed by 2% (w/v) agarose gel electrophoresis run at 300V in 0.5X TAE buffer. Amplicons were cleaned with 1 µl of ExoSAP-IT® PCR clean-up Kit (GE Healthcare, Piscataway, NJ, USA), and sent to Macrogen Europe (The Netherlands) for Sanger sequencing of the forward and reverse strands.



**Figure 2.** Adult fish captured in the Guadiana river basin with approx. 15 cm of total length.

**Table 1.** Information on the samples collected for molecular genetic analyses. N – number of specimens sampled (number of specimens with good quality sequences).

Location	Basin	Coordinates	N	Collection date
Ribeira de Corona	Sado	38.0265°N, 8.4315°W	20 (17)	16/Oct/2016
Ribeira de Odelouca	Arade	37.2270°N, 8.5056°W	7 (7)	18/Feb/2015
Ribeira de Odeleite	Guadiana	37.3650°N, 7.4858°W	7 (6)	18/Feb/2015
Ribeira do Vascão	Guadiana	37.5284°N, 7.5237°W	7 (7)	18/Feb/2015

The resulting nucleotide sequences were imported into Geneious® 10.2.2 (Biomatters Ltd., Auckland, New Zealand), checked by eye, and manually edited to remove low quality positions at the 5' and 3' ends as well as to resolve ambiguities in nucleotide assignment. Additional cytochrome *b* sequences were obtained from GenBank including representatives of the seven *Australoheros* species sampled in their native range (n=38, included in Concheiro Pérez et al., 2007; Říčan & Kullander, 2008; Říčan et al., 2011; Appendix 1), to serve for comparison against sequences from non-native Portuguese cichlid fish. All sequences were aligned in Geneious using the default algorithm, and the full alignment was trimmed to a homologous fragment and checked for gaps and absence of stop codons. Sequence comparison was performed via construction of a Neighbor Joining (NJ) tree based on Tamura-Nei's genetic distances (Tamura & Nei, 1993) between sequence pairs, and using 1000 bootstrap replicates to estimate branch support values, as implemented in Geneious.

## RESULTS

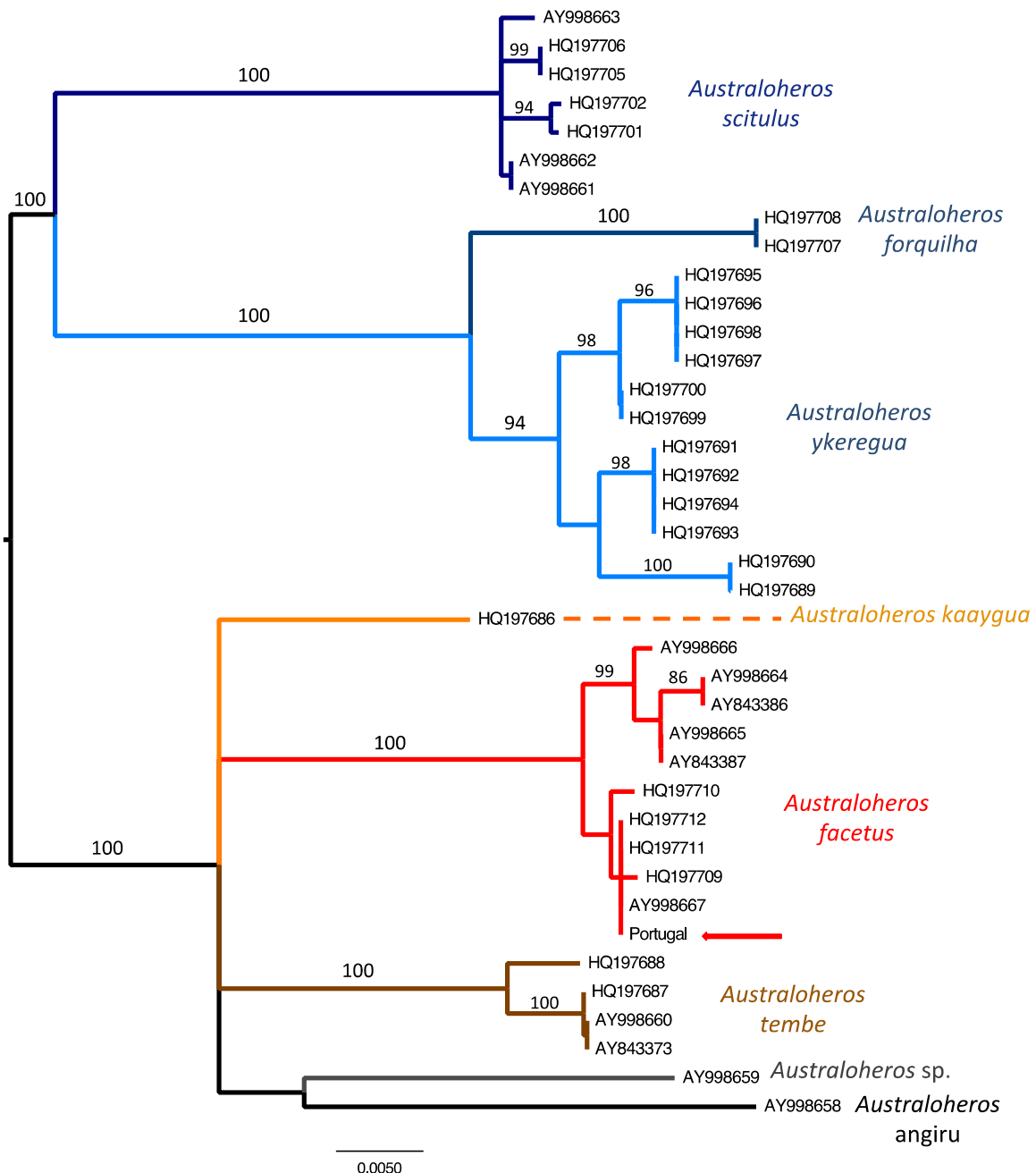
The following diagnostic morphological and meristic traits for the family Cichlidae were observed, namely: one nostril on each side of snout; interrupted lateral line with 20-50 scales; moderately deep and lat-

erally compressed body; dorsal fin with 7-25 spines and 5-30 soft rays; anal fin with 3-15 spines and 4-15 soft rays. Diagnostic morphological and meristic characteristics for the genus *Australoheros* were also observed, namely: <25 modal scale counts in E1 row; scales on chest of similar size to flank scales; three to four abdominal bars; five or more anal fin spines. Finally, the following diagnostic characteristics for *Australoheros facetus* were observed: scale counts in E1 row 23-27 (mode: 25); upper lateral line scale counts 10-18 (mode: 17); lower lateral line scale counts 7-11 (mode: 9); anal fin VI, 9-8; dorsal fin XV-XVI, 10-9; short caudal peduncle covered with 3 scale rows; mouth large and slightly upturned; mid-lateral blotch; four abdominal bars. The four abdominal bars and the anal fin spines and ray counts are the best characters supporting the studied specimens as *A. facetus* s. str. (see Říčan & Kullander, 2008).

Out of the 41 specimens sequenced for the cytochrome *b* gene fragment, 37 sequences (1087 bp) had good quality and were kept for analysis (Table 1). All sequences from Portuguese specimens showed 100% identity, resulting thus in a single unique haplotype. The final alignment including the Portuguese haplotype and the *Australoheros* sequences from GenBank corresponded to a homologous fragment of 939 bp. The resulting NJ tree showed well-supported clades corresponding to monophyletic species (Figure 3), including the clade

of *A. facetus* sequences with a bootstrap support value of 100%. The Portuguese haplotype was identical to a sequence from the locality La Reja, Rio de La Reconquista, (Entre Rios Province, north-eastern Argentina, GenBank Accession no. AY998667; Říčan & Kullander, 2006), belonging to the

Uruguay river drainage. Three haplotypes from specimens originally identified as *A. scitulus* (from the STRI collection; STRI-4692, collected by Bermingham et al.) are also included in this clade, but were revised by Říčan et al. (2011) to be *A. facetus*.



**Figure 3.** Neighbor Joining tree based on Tamura-Nei genetic distances of cytochrome *b* sequences of *Australoheros* species included in present study, using mid-point rooting. Numbers at nodes represent bootstrap support values >85. Species clades are colour-coded, and the *cytb* haplotype retrieved from the Portuguese specimens is marked with a red arrow.

## DISCUSSION

The morphological and molecular genetic results confirm the presence of the chameleon cichlid *A. facetus* (Jenyns 1842) in the three Portuguese drainages sampled - Sado, Arade and Guadiana. Accordingly, with the new systematics re-arrangements for the *Australoheros* genus, the species is native to Argentina and Uruguay, and has been reported as introduced in Chile in addition to Spain and Portugal (Říčan & Kullander, 2006; Ribeiro et al., 2007; Říčan et al., 2011; Vila & Habit, 2015). Its Iberian range is currently confined to southern Portuguese drainages, namely Sado, Arade, and Guadiana (including the Spanish section), occurring in the lower Guadalquivir and, possibly, Segura (Ribeiro et al., 2007; Fernández-Delgado et al., 2014). The species was also recently detected on the freshwater upstream reaches of Lagoa de Albufeira, Portugal (38.527010°N, 9.140071°W) based on a photo voucher (Cabral, H., personal communication). This new record refers to a small coastal drainage leading to a coastal lagoon (Lagoa de Albufeira), not connected to any of the drainages where the species was previously reported, and suggests a progressive, human-driven northwards extension of the introduced range. In fact, *A. facetus* is commonly found in artificial urban lakes in Lisbon (northern to Lagoa de Albufeira), which indicates that it is used as ornamental species by citizens and aquarists.

No evidence has been found of the recent presence of *A. facetus* in its original recorded location in Praia de Mira. A comprehensive species survey and inventory of the coastal lagoons of Mira conducted in 2014 has not detected any cichlid fish (Varandas et al., 2014). The known populations of *A. facetus* in southern Portuguese drainages are about 300 km from Praia de Mira (Vouga drainage) and in independent river drainages (i.e. Sado, Arade and Guadiana). In fact, the first record of a wild population of *A. facetus* in Portugal was in the Guadiana drainage (Moura, Ardila river) in 1965 (Almaça, 1965). This implies

human-mediated introductions of this cichlid species into southern Portuguese drainages, most likely from the Mira fish hatchery (Vouga drainage, central Portugal). Additionally, the occurrence in the Mira drainage (southwestern Portugal) was probably an erroneous citation by previous authors (Collares-Pereira, 1985), since *A. facetus* was absent in past extensive surveys done across this basin (Magalhães et al., 2002). The reduced genetic diversity at the cytochrome *b* gene in the 37 Portuguese specimens (i.e. exhibiting a single haplotype) compared to the higher levels of haplotype diversity found in a smaller sample size from fish in their native range (e.g. 10 specimens from 6 sites exhibited 10 distinct haplotypes; Říčan et al., 2011) suggest the establishment of this non-native species from few individuals in all Portuguese river drainages. The species introduction in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula is assumed to be accidental and mediated by aquarists (Doadrio, 2001), among which there is a keen interest for this species (e.g. “Associação Portuguesa de Ciclídeos”; <http://www.apciclideos.org/>).

There is currently very limited information about the biology of *A. facetus* in Iberian waters. It is known that it has strong parental care (Baduy et al., 2017), reaches a maximum total length of 180 mm, and exhibits an extremely wide physiological tolerance (Ribeiro, 2008). These findings are in line with studies on the wide environmental tolerance range reported for the species, that can survive, under laboratory conditions, to water temperatures varying from ~5°C to ~37°C, and adults can cope well with salinities from freshwater to 12ppt, while juveniles can tolerate up to 18ppt (Baduy et al., 2016; Baduy, 2017). The species feeds predominantly on insects, small molluscs and crustaceans, and plant materials, but has an opportunistic feeding behaviour (Ribeiro, 2008). It exhibits a high degree of territoriality, especially during the breeding season (April-August; Ribeiro, 2008) when it is most aggressive and territorial (Doadrio, 2001; Kodde et al., 2016; Baduy et al., 2017). The above species' traits have the potential to facilitate the estab-



lishment and spread of *A. facetus* within Iberian drainages (Figure 4; Supplementary Material), and to significantly affect the host ecosystems via resource competition or predation (Kodde et al., 2016; Baduy, 2017).

In sum, this study unambiguously clarifies the taxonomic identity of the non-native cichlid fish present in Portuguese drainages as *A. facetus*, which is an essential first step in any future biological studies.

## AUDIO-VISUAL SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

*Australoheros facetus* at Ribeira da Foupana, Portugal. FiSHMED Youtube channel

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=gejQfKJImTE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gejQfKJImTE)

*Australoheros facetus* among aquatic plants during late summer (October 7<sup>th</sup> 2014), occupying shallow areas with slow currents in the Foupana river (Gadiana drainage), together with native cyprinids (*Squalius alburnoides*). Forty seconds footage obtained with a Go-Pro Hero 4 Silver camera, operator Marta Vargas.

## AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

FR, FB, PMG, JLS contributed to sample collection, JC performed the laboratory work and data analyses. FR and AV planned, supervised, and coordinated the work. JC wrote the paper with major contributions from FB, PMG, AV and FR.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Cristina Rufino for her availability and precious help in accessing the collection at the Museu de Zoologia da Universidade de Coimbra. This study was developed under the project FRISK (PTDC/AAG-MAA/0350/2014) funded by Portuguese national funds through FCT/MCTES (PIDDAC) and co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER) through COMPETE— Programa

Operacional Factores de Competitividade (POFC). Strategic plan of MARE – Marine and Environmental Sciences Centre (UID/MAR/04292/2013) supported the sampling. Collection of specimens in southern streams was possible with additional funding from FCT grant CCMAR/Multi/04326/2013. AV and JLS were funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (SFRH/BPD/77487/2011 and SFRH/BPD/67008/2009 respectively). FB was recipient of a doctoral fellowship from the Brazilian CNPq Program Science without Borders (245971/2012-2).

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**DOI: 10.29094/FiSHMED.2018.001**

**Appendix.** List of *Australoheros* cytochrome *b* sequences included in this study with information on the drainage and the country where the specimens were sampled, and the corresponding GenBank Accession number (GenBank#). \*These specimens are listed with the original species names but species identifications were reviewed by Říčan et al. (2011).

Species	Drainage(s)	Country	GenBank#
<i>Australoheros</i> sp.	Arade, Sado, Guadiana	Portugal	This study
<i>Australoheros angiru</i>	Iguazu	Brazil	AY998658
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	La Plata	Argentina	AY998664
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	La Plata	Argentina	AY843386
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	Paraná	Paraguay	HQ197709
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	Paraná	Paraguay	HQ197710
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	Paraná	Argentina	HQ197711
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	Paraná	Argentina	HQ197712
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	AY843387
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i> *	Uruguay	Argentina	AY998665
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	AY998667
<i>Australoheros facetus</i>	La Plata	Uruguay	AY998666
<i>Australoheros forquilha</i>	Uruguay	Brazil	HQ197707
<i>Australoheros forquilha</i>	Uruguay	Brazil	HQ197708
<i>Australoheros kaaygua</i>	Iguazu	Argentina	HQ197686
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197705
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197706
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197701
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197702
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i>	La Plata	Uruguay	AY998662
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i>	La Plata	Uruguay	AY998661
<i>Australoheros scitulus</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	AY998663



**Non-native cichlids in Portugal**  
**DOI: 10.29094/FiSHMED.2018.001**

Species	Drainage(s)	Country	GenBank#
<i>Australoheros tembe</i>	Paraná (Uruguay stream)	Argentina	HQ197687
<i>Australoheros tembe</i>	Paraná (Uruguay stream)	Argentina	HQ197688
<i>Australoheros tembe</i>	Paraná (Uruguay stream)	Argentina	AY998660
<i>Australoheros tembe</i>	Paraná (Uruguay stream)	Argentina	AY843373
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197689
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197690
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197691
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197692
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197693
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197694
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197695
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197696
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197697
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197698
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197699
<i>Australoheros ykeregua</i>	Uruguay	Argentina	HQ197700
<i>Australoheros sp. Uruguai*</i>	Uruguay	Uruguay	AY998659