

THE GALAPAGOS GIANT TORTOISE



CHARACTERISTICS

The giant tortoise of the Galapagos Archipelago (Ecuador) is one of the most impressive reptiles on the planet. Called the “elephantine tortoise” because of its enormous feet, which resemble those of an elephant, it has lifestyles and shells that vary between islands and sub-species. Some live in dry, grassy areas, sometimes on the seashore, whilst others live on volcanoes of medium height, pebbly areas, or humid areas. In general they show a preference for the driest parts of the islands, but they do not hesitate to

<i>Kingdom</i>	Animal
<i>Phylum</i>	Chordata
<i>Class</i>	Reptilia
<i>Order</i>	Testudines
<i>Family</i>	Testudinidæ
<i>Genus</i>	Geochelone
<i>Latin name</i>	Geochelone nigra
<i>Weight</i>	225 kg
<i>Size</i>	1.20 m
<i>Sexual maturity</i>	20-25 years
<i>Laying season</i>	June to December
<i>Incubation period</i>	90 to 240 days
<i>Number of eggs</i>	2 to 17
<i>Diet</i>	Herbivore
<i>Longevity</i>	150 years
<i>IUCN status</i>	Vulnerable



The animal was formerly well represented throughout the Galapagos Archipelago; the IUCN now classes it as vulnerable.

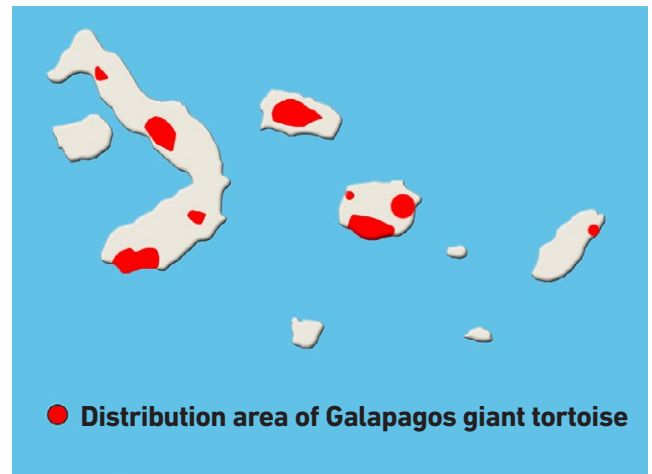
The Galapagos giant tortoise has not teeth. Its cutting beak enables it to cut fruits and plants.



cover long distances to reach sources of fresh water to meet their significant water needs. That is how they come to create trails that have criss-crossed the islands since time immemorial. They weigh up to 225 kg, which makes their journeys rather slow, with an average speed of less than 0.50 km/hr. The species presents a very long neck that is quite slim and blackish in colour with fine orange-ish suture marks. The head is thinner and triangular than in the giant Aldabra tortoise, especially in old males. The shell remains unchanged during the animal's life, and is rounded out, and the feet carry claws. Mating generally take place during the wet season. The male's bawling is

impressive, and can be heard for several hundred metres around. The eggs are buried in open, sunny areas. The babies weigh about 50 g at birth. They are stocky oval-shaped, rather flat, uniformly russet to bronze, and with no clear markings. This peaceful animal has come from the depths of time. In days gone by, it bred all over the islands; now, it is threatened with extinction. Over 100 000

Galapagos giant tortoises have been killed. The whole population of the archipelago is now home to no more than 13 000 tortoises. Intensive collection by sailors and buccaneers has eradicated some sub-species. Others are living on borrowed time. Rats, pigs, and dogs were introduced by humans, and have caused ravages amongst the young. In the beginning, their only natural predator was the Galapagos hawk. The numberless goats destroy all the plant substrate that feeds the tortoises, making the situation a dramatic one. For a few years now, their natural habitat has been retreating before the growth of human populations and agriculture. On islands where tourists may land, it is forbidden to touch the tortoises. They are a definite presence in zoos and collec-



tions around the world, where they reproduce reasonably well. Nonetheless, their re-introduction is not possible, but it should prevent illegal collecting in the archipelago, followed by export.

Rats, pigs, and dogs cause ravages amongst the babies of the Galapagos giant tortoise.



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