



DESERT TORTOISE

Gopherus agassizii

Order Testudines
Family Testudinidae
Genus Gopherus
Species agassizii

Geographic Range

Mojave and Sonoran deserts of southwestern US and northwestern Mexico

Habitat

Desert regions, canyon bottoms, rocky hillsides

Niche

Terrestrial, diurnal, herbivorous, nomadic

Wild Diet

Herbs, grasses, flowers, fruits, cacti. Most of the moisture they require comes from the food that they eat.

Life Span

High mortality rate among young. If they survive to the age of 20, they typically live between 50 – 80 years.

Appearance

Dull brown to dull yellow in color. Shell is 6 – 14 inches in length and weight is between 8 – 15 pounds. Males are generally larger than females.

Adaptations

Long spade-like nails for digging in sand. Males also have a gular shield – a bony plate on their plastron – which aids in flipping rivals when competing for mates.

Fun Facts

The desert tortoise is the official reptile of the state of California. Males will fight for breeding rights, which includes ramming, chasing and trying to flip opponents. Breeding takes place from spring to fall, and females can store sperm for up to 18 months, generally laying eggs after winter hibernation. An average size clutch is 3-5 eggs, laid in a nest scooped from the desert sand. Incubation lasts between 90 – 135 days and temperature plays a role both in the length of incubation and the sex of the hatchlings.



At the Zoo

"Cactus", "Mojave" & "Helga Feinstein" all live at the Koret Animal Resource Center.

Comparison

Tortoises and turtles both belong to the same order which evolved over 200 million years ago while dinosaurs walked the earth. Turtles are aquatic or semi-aquatic with streamlined shells and are mostly omnivorous. Tortoises live on land and have domed shells which they can retreat inside and are herbivorous.

Status and Conservation

Vulnerable

Threats

Habitat destruction and fragmentation, road mortality, and the pet trade. This includes both the collection and release of former pets; many of which had caught a respiratory illness in captivity and passed it on to wild populations.

Bibliography

Nature Trail Handbook, Animal Diversity Web

