



A Sheltered Life: The Unexpected History of the Giant Tortoise

Paul Chambers

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For millennia the mighty giant tortoises lived in isolation on remote oceanic islands such as the Galapagos, Seychelles and Mauritius. Then in the sixteenth century sailors discovered that they were good to eat, and their strategic location led to a wholesale plunder of their population by passing ships.

Later, many Victorian scientists became fascinated with these creatures, directly inspiring the first understanding of ecology and biogeography and Darwin's theory of natural selection. The giant tortoise was also the subject of the world's first conservation fight in the 1870s. Indeed many people's lives have been touched by these gentle giants. The French were happy to surrender the island of Mauritius in 1810, but balked at handing over their mascot tortoise, and the British and American governments were forced to concede the tortoises in a major Cold War incident. The twentieth century saw the establishment of wildlife reserves in the Galapagos and elsewhere, but it has been too late for many species. However, modern genetics has been able to track down members of what were once believed to be extinct populations. *A Sheltered Life* is a fascinating look at one of the world's strangest and most wondrous animals--whose significance in modern science and culture cannot be underestimated.

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