

Lonesome George may not be so lonesome after all

May 2 2007



A Macquarie University scientist has helped prove that Lonesome George, named by the Guinness Book of Records as the world's rarest living creature may in fact have relatives living nearby.

Since 2001, Dr Luciano Beheregaray of Macquarie University's Department of Biological Sciences has been analysing giant tortoise samples taken by a team of international scientists in co-operation with the Galápagos National Park and the Charles Darwin Research Station.

Of the 14 giant tortoise species that once lived on the various islands of the Galápagos, three have become extinct. Lonesome George, who was relocated in 1972 to the Charles Darwin Research Station, was believed

to be the sole living representative of another species, which existed only on the island of Pinta.

However, in their just published paper in the renowned journal *Current Biology*, Beheregaray and colleagues describe how their DNA analysis unexpectedly identified a tortoise on Volcano Wolf, Isabela Island, that has half of its genes in common with Lonesome George.

"The results are great news for George and his species. There are over 1,000 tortoises living on Volcano Wolf. Finding additional individuals of pure Pinta ancestry on Wolf would require an expedition with a team of about 20 people and three to four weeks of exhaustive sampling on the volcano," says Beheregaray.

"Tortoises from other islands were probably taken to Isabela as part of the whaling activities in the Pacific during the 18th and 19th Centuries. Now, with the results of our advanced DNA approaches we are in a position to envision a captive breeding program capable of reintroducing George's species onto Pinta Island."

Source: Macquarie University

Citation: Lonesome George may not be so lonesome after all (2007, May 2) retrieved 8 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-05-lonesome-george.html>

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