

Sexploits of Diego the Tortoise save Galapagos species

September 14 2016, by Santiago Piedra Silva



Diego, a tortoise of the endangered *Chelonoidis hoodensis* subspecies from Española Island, is seen in a breeding centre at Galapagos National Park, Ecuador on September 10, 2016

He's over 100 years old, but his sex life is the stuff of legend. Diego the Tortoise is quite the ladies' man, and his exploits have helped save his species from extinction.

Diego, a Galapagos giant [tortoise](#), has fathered an estimated 800 offspring, almost single-handedly rebuilding the species' population on their native island, Espanola, the southernmost in the Galapagos Archipelago.

"He's a very sexually active male reproducer. He's contributed enormously to repopulating the island," said Washington Tapia, a tortoise preservation specialist at Galapagos National Park.

Diego is a *Chelonoidis hoodensis*, a species found in the wild only on Espanola.

The island is one of the oldest in the Galapagos, the Pacific archipelago made famous by Charles Darwin's studies of its breathtaking biodiversity.

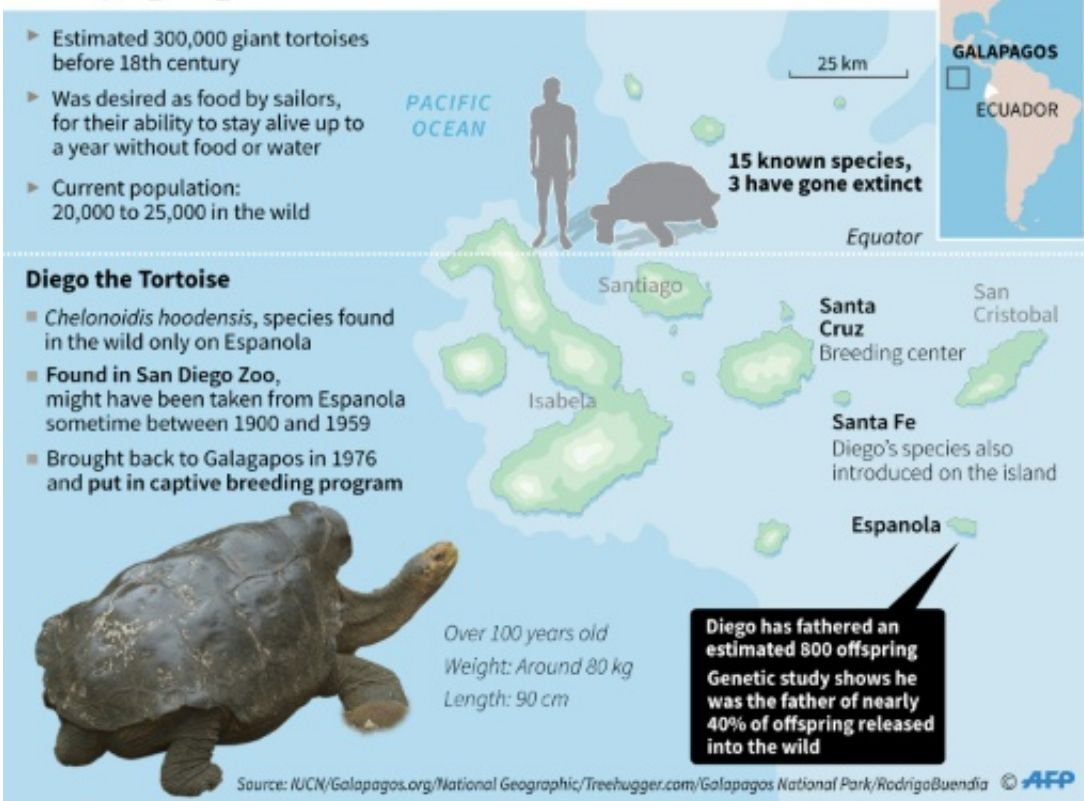
Around 50 years ago, there were only two males and 12 females of Diego's species alive on Espanola, and they were too spread out to reproduce.

He has done more than any other tortoise to turn that around—with the help of his mates, of course.

Diego lives at a tortoise breeding center on Santa Cruz Island, one of the largest in the Galapagos.

He is the dominant male of the three assigned to repopulate Espanola.

Galapagos giant tortoises



Estimated 300,000 giant tortoises before 18th century

Was desired as food by sailors, for their ability to stay alive up to a year without food or water

Current population: 20,000 to 25,000 in the wild

Diego the Tortoise

- Chelonoidis hoodensis*, species found in the wild only on Espanola
- Found in San Diego Zoo, might have been taken from Espanola sometime between 1900 and 1959
- Brought back to Galapagos in 1976 and put in captive breeding program

Over 100 years old
Weight: Around 80 kg
Length: 90 cm

Diego has fathered an estimated 800 offspring
Genetic study shows he was the father of nearly 40% of offspring released into the wild

15 known species, 3 have gone extinct

Source: IUCN/Galapagos.org/National Geographic/Treehugger.com/Galapagos National Park/RodrigoBuendia © AFP

Galapagos giant tortoises

He shares his enclosure with six females, his partners in the task of saving their species.

Tough work, but some tortoise has to do it.

Mysterious Casanova

On a cloudy morning with chilly wind, Diego timidly peeks his head out from his thick shell, then slowly plods toward some leaves for breakfast.

"Look, look! He came out. How pretty," said a young girl as she looked

on.

Diego weighs about 80 kilograms (175 pounds), is nearly 90 centimeters (35 inches) long and 1.5 meters (five feet) tall if he really stretches his legs and neck.

He has a mysterious, globe-trotting background to go with his reputation as a Casanova.



Of the 15 species of giant tortoise known to have originated in the Galapagos, three have gone extinct—victims of 18th-century pirates who plundered the islands' fragile ecosystem

Diego was found at the San Diego Zoo—hence his name—after *Chelonoidis hoodensis* was identified as a species and an international

campaign was launched to find more of the rare tortoises.

"We don't know exactly how or when he arrived in the United States. He must have been taken from Espanola sometime between 1900 and 1959 by a scientific expedition," said Tapia.

After being located at the zoo in California, Diego was brought back to the Galapagos in 1976 and put in the captive breeding program.

The 40% dad

Little did scientists realize just how effective he was, until six years ago.

"We did a genetic study and we discovered that he was the father of nearly 40 percent of the offspring released into the wild on Espanola," Tapia told AFP.

In all, around 2,000 tortoises have been released on the small island. Thanks to the program, the species is no longer facing extinction.



Diego, a Galapagos giant tortoise, has fathered an estimated 800 offspring, almost single-handedly rebuilding the species' population on their native island, Espanola

"I wouldn't say (the species) is in perfect health, because historical records show there probably used to be more than 5,000 tortoises on the island. But it's a population that's in pretty good shape—and growing, which is the most important," said Tapia.

Of the 15 species of giant tortoise known to have originated in the Galapagos, three have gone extinct—victims of 18th-century pirates who plundered the [islands](#)' fragile ecosystem.

Diego's species has also been introduced on the island of Santa Fe, where a genetically similar one, *Chelonoidis* spp, disappeared more than 150 years ago.

Not all critically endangered tortoises rise to the challenge as Diego has.

Hopes for another threatened [species](#), *Chelonoidis abingdoni*, faded when its last known survivor died in 2012 at more than 100 years old.

Known as Lonesome George, he had refused for years to breed in captivity.

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