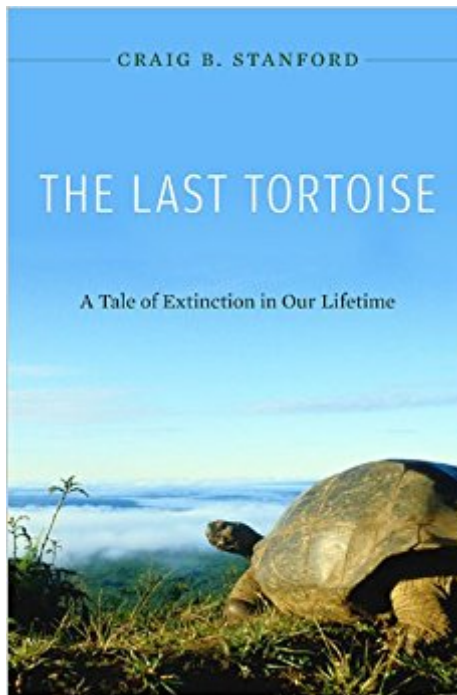




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The Last Tortoise: A Tale Of Extinction In Our Lifetime



Synopsis

Tortoises may be the first family of higher animals to become extinct in the coming decades. They are losing the survival race because of what distinguishes them, in particular their slow, steady pace of life and reproduction. The Last Tortoise offers an introduction to these remarkable animals and the extraordinary adaptations that have allowed them to successfully populate a diverse range of habitats—from deserts to islands to tropical forests. The shields that protect their shoulders and ribs have helped them evade predators. They are also safeguarded by their extreme longevity and long period of fertility. Craig Stanford details how human predation has overcome these evolutionary advantages, extinguishing several species and threatening the remaining forty-five. At the center of this beautifully written work is Stanford's own research in the Mascarene and Galapagos Islands, where the plight of giant tortoise populations illustrates the threat faced by all tortoises. He addresses unique survival problems, from genetic issues to the costs and benefits of different reproductive strategies. Though the picture Stanford draws is bleak, he offers reason for hope in the face of seemingly inevitable tragedy. Like many intractable environmental problems, extinction is not manifest destiny. Focusing on tortoise nurseries and breeding facilities, the substitution of proxy species for extinct tortoises, and the introduction of species to new environments, Stanford's work makes a persuasive case for the future of the tortoise in all its rich diversity.

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Customer Reviews

Stanford writes in an engaging, storytelling style that speaks of his passion for the topic and his personal experiences both as a young naturalist and a seasoned biologist. He details the importance of tortoises to the various ecosystems they inhabit and builds a case for our need to be concerned about their declining population sizes, both from the standpoint of tortoise species and whole ecosystems. (Eleanor Sterling Times Higher Education 2010-05-13) Longevity, toughness and wisdom are the qualities we associate with this iconic animal. Craig B. Stanford shows how their habitat is threatened and takes us to the markets where they are sold for food, as pets and even as soup bowls...He writes about conservationists and their efforts to combat extinction risk, but he is not hopeful: "Once the wild populations are virtually exterminated," a few will "hang on only in zoos and in the hands of wealthy private collectors. They will no longer be a species in the evolutionary sense. They will just be a scattered gene pool, a few protected, priceless animals locked up in cages." Here's a chance to know a little about them before they are gone. (Susan Salter Reynolds Los Angeles Times 2010-05-16)[Stanford's] reporting here is professional and remarkably thorough, but tinged with anger and sadness at the senselessness of the crisis. (Greg Ross American Scientist 2010-07-01) Stanford utilized his expertise in primate anthropology and his field experiences with turtles in the Galapagos and Mascarene islands to produce an easily readable and exceptionally informative, if somewhat depressing, narrative on globally threatened turtles, collectively called tortoises. (E. D. Keiser Choice 2010-11-01)

Craig B. Stanford is Professor of Biological Sciences and Anthropology and Co-Director of the Jane Goodall Research Center at the University of Southern California.

This is another of those books where I wish I could give a half star - maybe 3.5! I give it 4 because I think the author achieved his aim; I am now aware of the plight of tortoises, I feel concerned about tortoises, and I won't eat any (which I wouldn't have anyway, but now I definitely won't). On the other hand, I usually really enjoy scientific animal tales, and yet I rarely felt totally engaged by this book. I would start to get sucked in, and then, fade out again. I wonder if the issue was that the author is talking about all tortoises in general rather than a single species? In this way, he rarely can't go into more than a small story of any particular tortoise group or research project - so you end up feeling like you know tortoises sort of, like the people who live at the end of the street, rather than very well like your neighbor or friend you hang out with. Tortoises no longer feel like total strangers (at least for people who start out without knowing much about tortoises) and I would be interested to know more about them, but I still don't feel I really know any particular group of tortoises very well.

I am a graduate student conducting my master's research on gopher tortoise conservation in Florida. I found this book to be engaging, thorough, and passionate. It's true that the tortoise family is being immensely affected by anthropogenic influences - habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, pet dogs, rattlesnake roundups, hunting, you name it. They are unable to recover due to their delayed sexual maturity and relatively low fecundity. The very qualities of a tortoise that make them so unassuming and sweet to us are the reasons that they have been such an easy target. I was really happy to see that someone has finally taken the time to address all the issues that tortoises face. While sea turtles are most definitely threatened, they command more media attention than a tortoise ever would. The fact of the matter is, a piece of the puzzle is gone every time a species vanishes. The gopher tortoise is a keystone species, providing homes for over 300 other species within the burrows it constructs. Only 3% of viable tortoise habitat remains that existed 200 years ago. When they are gone, all the other species that rely on their burrows for refuge will also go. I would like to extend a "thank-you" to Dr. Stanford for writing this book. While it is not always uplifting, I am glad that more people will know about the tortoise's plight. Hopefully, some of them will decide to go out and learn more about it :)

This is a sleeper, not the dull tome on a plodding reptile that you might expect. First-hand experiences described in engaging prose make this short book a compelling read. In addition, the author is refreshingly frank (if sometimes controversial) about conservation strategies. His passion for tortoises, his anger and grief at their extermination from their natural habitats, and the conservation measures he proposes are presented clearly and convincingly. This will be a permanent part of my natural history library.

The Last Tortoise is an outstanding and fascinating work. Stanford intertwines fact and story and makes the book read like a piece of literature instead of a textbook. Stressing the point that we must also be concerned about land tortoises as well as sea turtles is new in turtle protection. This is a must read not only for herpetologists and turtle enthusiasts, but also for anyone who has an interest in conservation or ecology. Buy it today !! Larry Cartmill, Ph.D. Herpetology Instructor

Some may say I am biased myself, but I take issue with the author throwing herpetoculture (the keeping and breeding of reptiles and amphibians) under the bus and blaming it for the plight of turtles and tortoises. He characterizes people who keep reptiles largely as inept, disregarding the

fact that most reptiles available for purchase are captive bred, many from 2nd or 3rd generation captive bred parents. Yes, currently many captive bred tortoises come from wild-caught parents, but how many babies do 2 adult tortoises produce? 2 Adults could produce at least 10-15 babies a year, lessening the desire for wild-caught animals and ensuring that there will be animals left alive in captivity once the wild habitats are destroyed (as most probably will be). The fact is that no one knows better how to keep and breed reptiles than the herpetoculturists who are dedicated them, and people in this hobby have bred more reptiles in captivity and increased the numbers of these animals more than any zoo or high-minded academic EVER will. The idea that leaving the animals in the wild is going to fix the problem is totally unrealistic. If it was, golden toads would still be around, for example. Radiated tortoises, some of the rarest tortoises in the world, are now routinely bred in captivity, and many blood-lines are available. Same thing for Egyptian tortoises, star tortoises, etc. That is my problem with this book. It's great to try and preserve tortoises in the wild, and I hope the author is successful, but to attack herpetoculture the way he does, claiming it has nothing to offer, is just plain ignorance and/or prejudice. Some of the best reptile breeders in the world don't work in a zoo or have their doctorate, so spare me the arrogance Dr. Stanford.

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