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Solutions for English Teaching

Galápagos giant tortoise saved from extinction by breeding programme

Level 2 • Intermediate

1 Warmer

Write as many things as you can about goats and giant tortoises during a three-minute brainstorming session.



2 Key words

Write the key words from the article next to their definitions. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

plodded	breeding	threat	ecosystem	offspring	thriving	
hatchlings	species	reproduce	marksmen	cull	evolution	endemic

1. the process of mating and producing young animals _____ (title)
2. a plant or animal group whose members all have similar general features and are able to produce young plants or animals together _____ (para 1)
3. animals that have recently emerged from eggs _____ (para 2)
4. very successful _____ (para 2)
5. all the plants and animals in a particular area, considered as a system with parts that depend on one another _____ (para 6)
6. the scientific theory that says that types of plant and animal change gradually over long periods of time _____ (para 7)
7. very common or strongly established in a place or situation _____ (para 8)
8. to kill animals deliberately, especially in order to stop the population from becoming too large _____ (para 9)
9. people who are skilful at shooting _____ (para 9)
10. a situation or an activity that could cause harm or danger _____ (para 10)
11. to have babies _____ (para 11)
12. the baby or babies of an animal _____ (para 12)
13. simple past form of a verb meaning *to walk with slow heavy steps* _____ (para 12)

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Rory Carroll, Latin America correspondent
27 June, 2010

1 Scientists have successfully reintroduced giant tortoises to a Galápagos island where the species was once very close to extinction. This has raised conservation hopes for the rest of the archipelago.

2 A survey of Española, the southernmost island, confirmed last week that an effort to reintroduce giant tortoise hatchlings has produced a thriving, reproducing population of more than 1,500 animals. The project aims to turn the clock back to before human beings almost wiped out a species that helped to inspire Charles Darwin's theories on evolution and natural selection. "It's a great end to a sad story," said Johannah Barry, president of Galápagos Conservancy, a Virginia-based organization which partly funded the study.

3 Preliminary results of the survey, conducted over ten days by 24 wardens from the Galápagos national park authority, found that albatross, cactus and woody vegetation had also partly recovered, restoring the island to something similar to what Darwin saw two centuries ago.

4 Giant tortoises (*Geochelone hoodensis*), whose population had dropped to about 15 in the 1970s, are once again a common sight on the island, said Washington Tapia, a park official who led the survey, which used electronic devices to track the animals. "During the expedition we found nests, recently hatched tortoises, and adults born on Española, which indicates that the tortoise population is doing well."

5 The population now numbers between 1,500 and 2,000, said Linda Cayot, a scientific adviser to Galápagos Conservancy. The original population was thought to number up to 5,000 before becoming a source of fresh meat for passing sailors.

6 The project's success has helped a plan to "re-tortoise" another island, Pinta, with the same species in the hope of recreating a "pre-human" balanced ecosystem. The rocky, volcanic islands, 600 miles west of mainland Ecuador, are a Unesco world natural heritage site and home to dozens of species found nowhere else.

7 "It's completely amazing, one of the few places where you can actually see evolution happening in real time," said Henry Nicholls, ambassador for the Galápagos Conservation Trust. He welcomed the recovery of Española's giant tortoise population. "They are an important species, which captures the public imagination."

8 For much of the 20th century the archipelago was a symbol of human destruction. After sailors ran out of tortoises to eat, they introduced goats to several islands. The handful of goats multiplied into thousands, then tens of thousands. They stripped vegetation and made the islands uninhabitable for the few remaining tortoises and other endemic species.

9 Authorities decided to cull the invaders in the 1970s with teams of marksmen, but some goats survived, bred and made the problem even worse until the 1990s, when helicopters, dogs and radio tracking devices were used.

10 The threat to the islands' endemic species meant there was little protest over the goat slaughter. "There was little public outrage because it was seen that the tortoises were at risk," said Barry. Scientists moved 15 giant tortoises – among the last survivors of the species – from their ruined Española habitat to a captive breeding programme. As the goats were killed, young tortoises from the breeding programme were reintroduced to the island.

11 "Tortoises have begun to play their role as ecosystem engineers," said Tapia, leader of the island survey. "We can say with certainty that the ecological perfection of Española is being re-established." A similar plan to repopulate Pinta, on the northern end of the archipelago, is now underway. However, the only surviving Pinta tortoise is Lonesome George, who has failed to reproduce despite decades in a captive breeding programme.

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12 Rather than wait to see if George produces offspring over the next few decades, scientists have decided to introduce Española tortoises – the closest genetic match to their Pinta cousins – to the island. The first 39 plodded on to their new home in May. "There is continuing work on all of the islands and the tortoise populations continue to grow. Eventually, we hope to see healthy populations on most of the islands," said Cayot.

13 Nicholls, author of a book on Lonesome George, said the Galápagos's most famous bachelor may yet become a father. "There have been so many surprises with George's story I wouldn't rule it out. And time is on his side."

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3 Comprehension check

Are these sentences true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Rewrite any that are false.

1. Española is an island between Pinta and Galápagos.
2. Thirty to 40 years ago, fewer than 20 tortoises lived on Española.
3. The Galápagos Conservancy is partly funding a survey which aims to cull the goats on Española.
4. A captive breeding programme has increased the numbers of giant tortoises on Española a hundredfold.
5. The tortoises almost became extinct because marksmen shot them for food.
6. Sailors brought goats to the island so that they would have a source of food when they next landed there.
7. The goats stripped the island of its accessible vegetation leaving nothing for the tortoises.
8. Lonesome George's offspring are now repopulating the island of Pinta.

4 Word stress

Write the words into the table according to their stress patterns. Then use the words to talk about the article.

~~archipelago~~ uninhabitable vegetation authorities volcanic Galápagos extinction organization invaders devices evolution population

ooOoo	ooOo	oOoo
archipelago		
oOo	**oooOo**	**ooOooo**

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5 Discussion

Would you like to help save the giant tortoises from extinction?
If yes, what could you do to help?
If no, why not?

6 Webquest

Search the internet for further information about one of the following:

- giant tortoises
- Lonesome George
- Española island
- Galápagos archipelago
- Galápagos Conservancy

Make an information poster and present it to your class. Include images and interesting facts as well as your own thoughts and impressions.

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