
Aldabra Giant Tortoise

Geochelone gigantea

Class: *Reptilia*

Order: *Chelonia*

Family: *Testudinidae*

Characteristics: Dark gray to black domed shell (carapace) averaging almost 4 ft. in length. Males in the wild can weigh more than 500 lbs. Males in captivity will weigh well over 700 lbs. Stout legs partially covered with big scales. Club-shaped feet with powerful claws. Short tail with claw-like spur on the tip. Long neck to aide in browsing on woody plants and branches up to 3 feet from the ground. Females smaller than males, averaging about 330 lbs.

Behavior: Active primarily in early morning and late evening and spend remainder of day resting in shady areas, shallow pools or mud holes. While resting they lie with the underside of their shell (plastron) on the ground and their head and limbs slightly retracted. When threatened, their head and limbs are pulled into the shell. Aldabra tortoises are found both individually and in aggregate herds.

Reproduction: Breeding occurs from February to May. Females lay clutches of 9 to 25 rubbery 2-inch diameter eggs in a shallow, dry nest. Less than half of the eggs are fertile. Incubation period is temperature dependent. In warm temperatures, eggs hatch in 3.5 months but in cooler temperatures incubation can be up to 8 months. After females lay their eggs there is no parental involvement. The young hatch as 3-inch long tortoises and dig out of the nest on their own. Females can produce a second clutch within the same breeding season.

Diet: Wild: Primarily vegetarians (herbivores). Low-growing grasses or plants or taller shrubs. Occasionally supplement with small invertebrates or carrion. They obtain most of the water from food sources.

Zoo: Apples, bananas, carrots, celery, spinach, zucchini and vitamins.

Conservation: Giant tortoises were common on the islands in the western Indian Ocean with no significant predators or competitors for food until the 1600s when increasing numbers of explorers and settlers visited the Seychelles Islands and removed or killed them in large numbers. By 1840 the only giant tortoises surviving in the wild in the area were on the Aldabra atoll. Aldabra tortoises were saved by appeals for conservation from prominent scientists of the time including Charles Darwin. Today the Aldabra atoll, now a World Heritage Site, is home to some 150,000 Aldabra Giant Tortoises. Captive breeding programs are active in conservation parks in Mauriitus and Rodrigues. International trade in the species is controlled by CITES (Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).

FYI: One of the world's largest species of tortoises and one of the longest living animals on the planet. From the 17th to 19th centuries tortoises were frequently captured and stored on board sailing ships to serve as fresh meat for the crew.



Range & Habitat:

Aldabra Atoll, part of Seychelles Islands off east coast of Africa and north of Madagascar. Lives in grasslands, scrublands, swamps.



Lifespan:

Lifespan in wild is unknown but estimated to be more than 100 years. Age is difficult to verify because they tend to outlive their human observers.

IUCN Conservation Status:

Vulnerable

