

DESERT TORTOISE: FACT OR FICTION?

Students will enjoy this fun team game that will determine who knows the most about the Sonoran Desert tortoise.

Arizona Science Standards:

SC04-S3C1-01

SC03-S3C1-02

SC04-S4C1-02

SC04-S4C4-02

GETTING STARTED

Divide your class into two teams. Have each team gather in separate parts of the classroom, and then have each one come up with a desert tortoise related name for their team. The instructor will read each of the statements below, addressing the statements to both teams. Each team is given a one minute huddle time to decide whether the statement is a fact or whether it is fiction. After the team responds, the instructor, using the information given on this sheet, tells the class about any information that the students may have not come up with on their own. The score for each team is kept on the board.

QUESTIONS

1. A desert tortoise will climb out of its shell when it grows too big and will move into a large one.

FALSE. Its shell is its backbone and ribs and grows with the rest of the animal.

2. The desert tortoise never needs to drink water.

FALSE. It gets most of its water from food that it eats but still needs to occasionally drink water.

3. Desert tortoises think that it's funny to urinate on people.

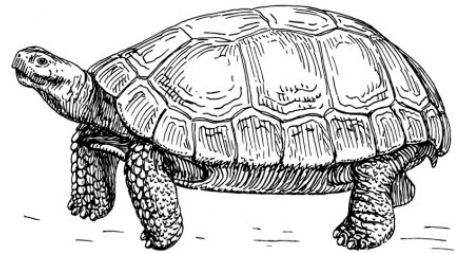
FALSE. They collect water in their bladder and save it for their body to use when no other water is available. When a stranger picks up a wild tortoise, it gets scared and will often lose its saved water. This can cause the tortoise to die of dehydration if it doesn't find any more water to drink soon.

4. When it gets too hot outside the desert tortoise goes underground.

TRUE. It will dig a burrow with its front legs and will stay there when it's too hot or too cold. It will also hibernate in its burrow. The burrow will often be made in the bank of a wash or under a bush.

5. By counting the number of rings on the shell of a tortoise you can guess it's approximate age.

TRUE. Draw a picture of a tortoise shell on the board like this: (It does not have to be complete, just give them the idea.)



As you draw it explain that the shell is made up of many sections and that every year a new ring is added to every section. During the winter, when the tortoise is hibernating the shell stops growing. Because of the yearly grow-stop pattern, one ring is added every year. Usually though, the rings on the sections of older tortoises have been worn down and you can no longer count all of them.

6. The desert tortoise has many sharp teeth.

FALSE. It is toothless, like all turtles. Its large tongue helps push food back into its mouth.

7. It is a vegetarian.

TRUE. It eats mostly grasses, and when they are in season, flowers and cactus fruit.

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8. The average desert tortoise lives to be 100 years old.

FALSE. Not quite that old, but they can get to be 80 years old, about as long as the average human.

9. Cutting into the shell of a desert tortoise won't hurt it.

FALSE. Remember that the shell is live, growing tissue – bone, skin, blood and nerve – and if it is cut it hurts. It is not dead like our fingernails. Also, a cut shell can cause infections to pass into the tortoise's internal body cavity, and this could lead to the animal's death.

10. It is illegal to collect wild desert tortoises.

TRUE. In Arizona the tortoise is a protected species. It is not an endangered species, but if it did not have the law to protect it, it would probably be over collected, and this could lead to it becoming very rare and even endangered.

11. Building homes, schools and roads for people are not a problem for tortoises.

FALSE. The biggest problem that desert tortoises face are habitat loss and habitat fragmentation. They are sometimes hit by cars while crossing roads and by off-road vehicles while they are out and about in the desert.

12. If you really want to have a desert tortoise in your yard you might be able to adopt one from the Desert Museum.

TRUE. The Desert Museum has a "tortoise orphanage". Any desert tortoise that has lived as a pet should not be returned to the wild because they might be carrying a respiratory disease and we don't want them to infect wild tortoises. Since they can live many years, sometimes they outlive their "owners", so we are a place that they can be returned to instead of the wild. We then find good homes for them.

13. The very favorite foods of a pet desert tortoise are bananas, tomatoes and lettuce.

FALSE. These are very unhealthy foods for a tortoise and will cause the animal to die, if these are the only foods that it is offered.

14. An adult Sonoran Desert tortoise can weigh as much as 30 pounds.

FALSE. On average adult Sonoran Desert Tortoise weigh between 10-15 pounds.

15. Desert tortoise spend most of their time under the ground in a burrow.

TRUE. They are one of the most elusive inhabitants of the desert, spending up to 95% of its time underground to escape the heat of the summer and the cold of winter.

16. Desert tortoise are not able to make any sounds.

FALSE. They are able to make hisses, pops and pink sounds, perhaps as fear and distress calls. Males to grunt when mating.

