

A TORTOISE FOR THE TAKING?

A story and maze that presents the challenges a desert tortoise faces from desert conditions and predators, as well as the impact of humans.

ARIZONA SCIENCE STANDARDS
SC00-S4C3-02,
SC01-S4C3-03,
SC03-S3C1-01

OBJECTIVES

Students should:

- Understand the challenges for survival faced by desert tortoises.
- Begin to consider humans' role in the environment and our responsibility for wise stewardship.

MATERIALS

- a copy of the Desert Tortoise Maze for each student
- markers, pencils, or crayons

BACKGROUND

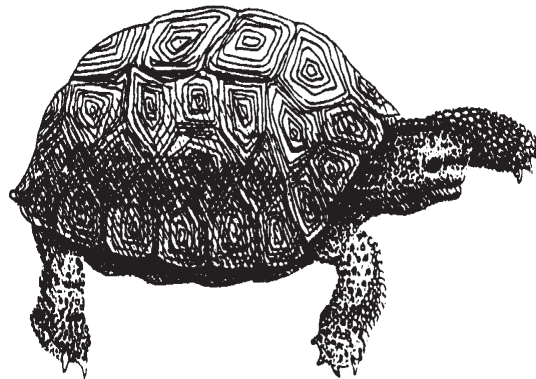
Desert tortoise numbers are dropping due to their capture for pets, as well as the impact of construction, recreation, and livestock grazing on their habitat. This activity looks at their example to introduce the concept of stewardship.

GETTING READY

Prepare the materials as listed in the left margin of this page.

DOING THE ACTIVITY

- 1) Read the *Desert Tortoise Tale* (on the following page) to the students.
- 2) Review some of the main points of the story with the children:



- What are some of the dangers that baby desert tortoises face? (Predation from hawks, ravens, foxes, and coyotes.)
- What about adults? (Loss of habitat to human development, damage to burrows.)
- Why should we not pick up a desert tortoise we see in the wild? (We can make them sick with human germs or cause them to lose precious water. There are exceptions, however, as illustrated in the following question.)

DISCUSSION

Ask the students, “Do you think there is ever a time when it might be a good idea to pick up a desert tortoise?” (If you see one in the middle of a road, it is probably safer for the tortoise to move it to side of the road in the direction it is headed. With an adult, move it to safety quickly and carefully, then let it go off into the desert.)


DESERT TORTOISE MAZE

- 1) Pass out the Desert Tortoise Maze.
- 2) Have the students complete the maze and color the different threats the baby tortoise faces along the way.

EXTENSION

Have the students illustrate and write their own story about a desert tortoise. Ask them to include some of the plants and animals it might find in its home, information about what the tortoise needs to survive, as well as the challenges it faces in its life.

DESERT TORTOISE TALE

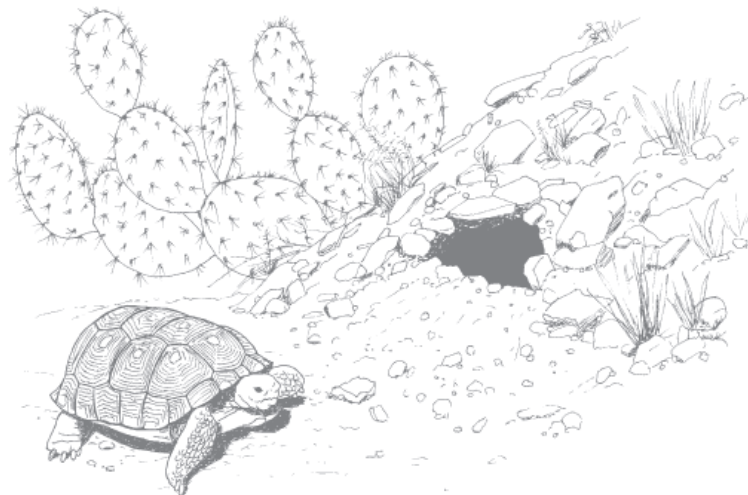


Desert Tortoise is a gentle, harmless land turtle that lives in the Sonoran Desert. Looking like a walking helmet, she pokes along at a slow and steady pace. In the spring, summer, and fall, she munches on grass, flowers, and cactus fruits. If she finds water, she will drink it, but her food gives her enough water to live. Because she is a reptile, her body temperature changes with the temperature around her. In the summer, she must find food quickly before the hot sun and warm desert ground heat her up too much. Luckily, she is a great digger. The burrows she digs underground are the perfect place to escape the hot, dry days of the desert. They are also a cozy spot to sleep through the winter, safe from the cold outside.

She will wake up in March and go out to look for food. In May or June, she will mate, dig a hole, lay her eggs in it, and bury them. The eggs hatch in about three months. When desert tortoises hatch, they are only about as big as 50 cent pieces. Their shells are soft. Predators like hawks, ravens, coyotes, and foxes can easily break them to get at the tortoise inside. When the tortoises get older, their shells grow hard and strong.

Because she is full grown, Desert Tortoise is safer from predators. But people can be a danger to her, too. As people build new homes and create new farms, factories, and mines in the desert, Desert Tortoise and her friends lose their homes and food supply. Careless motorcycle riders crush their burrows with their tires, and tortoises have no place to get out of the heat. Other people take tortoises from the wild to keep as pets. Even people who want to help tortoises might actually harm them. How? If people pick up and move them, desert tortoises might get human germs which can make them sick. Also, frightened tortoises urinate and lose precious water stored in their bladders. If they do not get a drink quickly, they could die.

What should you do when you see a desert tortoise? As you should do with any animal you find in the wild, watch from a distance. Do not pick it up. It knows the way to go.



NAME _____

DESERT TORTOISE MAZE

Help a tortoise! One of Desert Tortoise's babies is looking for food far from his burrow. Can you help him find a safe way back?

