

A Sheltered Life. The Unexpected History of the Giant Tortoise, by Paul Chambers. 2004. Oxford University Press, New York (www.oup.com) [originally published 2004 by John Murray, London]. xiv + 306 pp. Hardcover. US \$19.95. ISBN 0-19-522396-9; ISBN-13 978-0-19-522396-5.

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The title of this gracefully written biological history belies the content of the book. The tortoises of the oceanic islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans have hardly been sheltered from the rapacious predation of man. The author, Paul Chambers, is well aware of this devastating harvest. The title, of course, refers to the shell and its protective aspect prior to the arrival of humans. Similarly, he well recognizes the diversity of these insular giants, treating them as a single entity in the title because that is how sailors, colonists, and naturalists viewed them upon their first discovery and during the early centuries of tortoise-man interactions.

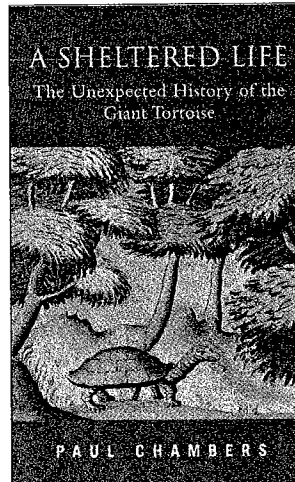
This book is not a conservation advocacy, although the conservation of giant tortoises is a core aspect of the narrative. It is impossible to discuss giant tortoises without examining man's rapacious behavior. This aspect of tortoise history is depressing reading, because all of us are aware of the outcome and can imagine the cruelty of harvesting and transport. Chambers presents the information factually, neither over- nor understating the extent and nature of tortoise harvesting. He reveals the stuttering start of tortoise conservation. Protection was a long time in arrival and remains in a fragile state in Aldabra and the Galápagos.

The narrative is organized into seven sections: Discovery; Inspiration; Decimation; Obsession; Pets; Recovery; In the Blood. Each section consists of two or more chapters. "Discovery" provides a history of the discovery of the giants by early navigators. "Inspiration" details the early taxonomic history of the giants. The focus, however, is the influence of the Galápagos tortoises on Darwin's developing thoughts on evolution. These chapters are delightful reading and most thought provoking, and I highly recommend them to anyone with slightest interest in Darwinian history. "Decimation" describes the decline and extinction of Indian Ocean tortoises and the impact of the whaling fleet on the Galápagos populations. Albert Günther and Walter Rothschild are the main figures in "Obsessions." I was aware of Günther's impact on giant tortoise taxonomy, but it was a delightful surprise to discover his crusading efforts to protect them, particularly the Indian Ocean ones. I share Chambers' assessment that his effort to

establish breeding colonies outside a species' native habitat was misguided and not a viable solution to their conservation. Similarly, the current captive colonies of turtles and tortoises are equally misguided conservation efforts, serving the pet-keeper syndrome but not conservation of chelonians.

"Pets" examines the history of a few individual captive tortoises of exceptional longevity. Chambers' style here is polite and thorough investigative reporting. He also demonstrates that Darwin did not personally bring Galápagos tortoises home from his Beagle cruise. "Recovery" details 20th century attempts and successes in giant tortoise conservation. "In the Blood" examines current systematic and nomenclatural issues. Such matters are seldom of interest to laity or, for that matter, to most biologists. The telling here is thorough, yet a relaxed and honest report of recent (through 2003) scientific studies that reveal the survival of a single Indian Ocean giant (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*) and the persistence of a dozen-plus genetically distinct populations of Galápagos *Geochelone*.

I urge everyone with the slightest interest in tortoises and/or the history of biology to read Chambers' "A Sheltered Life." It offers a fascinating glimpse of Charles Darwin and the influence of tortoises on his development of evolutionary theory, revelations of Albert Günther as a conservationist, and many more aspects about giant tortoises.



It was the giant tortoise that directly inspired Darwin to create his theory of natural selection. Could a tortoise which Darwin took from the Galapagos in 1835 still be alive today in an Australian zoo? Indeed many people have become fascinated with these gentle giants. No doubt, the history of the giant tortoises is itself a truly fascinating topic, however, it is a long history and Chambers knits it tightly into just over 300-pages. Complimented with thought-provoking illustrations and guiding maps, Chambers also supplements readers with archived photographs where available and enchanting excerpts from the journals of renowned naturalists including Darwin and Wallace (whom, when you read this book, aren't as significant characters to the story as you think!).

A sheltered life: the unexpected history of the giant tortoise. John Murray (Publishers), London. 2004. Aldabra Giant Tortoise *Geochelone gigantea*. Galapagos tortoise on Santa Cruz Island, Galapagos Islands. Gigantic galapagos turtle, *Chelonoidis nigra* on the island of Santa Cruz. Related pages[change | change source]. Turtle. Despite the title, giant tortoises have had anything but a sheltered life, at least since humans became interested in them. Unlike other giant species, such as killer kangaroos or cave lions, tortoises managed to survive the ice age, taking refuge on isolated archipelagos like the Galapagos islands in the Pacific, or the Mascarene islands in the Indian Ocean. But mankind has proved a more deadly opponent than nature because, unfortunately for the giant tortoises, they tasted great. By 1770 it seemed that the giant tortoises would follow in the foot steps of that other former inhabitant of the Mascarene islands: the dodo. The giant tortoises of the Galapagos islands fared little better. By 1830 some 100,000 had been taken, mostly by British whaling ships.