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Lonesome George finds company at last

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Lonesome George, a giant Galapagos tortoise long thought to be the sole survivor of his species, has relatives living on a nearby island, scientists say.

George was found on the small island of Pinta in 1972, the last living member of the tortoise species *Geochelone abingdoni*.

Scientists took him into captivity and hoped he would mate with females from another tortoise species.

But 35 years later he still has not produced offspring.

Now, Dr Luciano Beheregaray from Australia's [Macquarie University](#) and colleagues have found genetically related animals living in a remote part of Isabela Island, another part of the Galapagos archipelago.

In the journal [Current Biology](#) today they report finding a male tortoise whose father was from Pinta.

"We found an individual that has a paternal lineage from George's species, so it's a hybrid," says Beheregaray, who worked with US and Canadian colleagues on the project.

Scientists have been searching for a relative for George for more than 10 years, focusing mostly on his maternal relatives.

"We had looked at the maternal lineage from many, many tortoises, maybe 1000 in total," Beheregaray says.

"After all this time, there was very little hope that anything related to George was still alive."

The scientists also wanted to use the genetic material contributed by George's father in their search for relatives.



DNA studies show that Lonesome George, long thought to be the last of the Galapagos tortoise species from Pinta Island, has relatives after all (Image: Thomas Fritts)

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But to do this they needed more than just George's DNA to compare it with.

Then they hit on the idea of collecting DNA from dead Pinta tortoises in museums.

The DNA collected from those six animals provided just enough data for them to begin the search for George's paternal relations among the tortoises of the Galapagos, Beheregaray says.

"We could [then] show, using very sophisticated statistical methods, that there was indeed a contribution from Pinta in one individual," he says.

That individual was living on Volcano Wolf, a rugged and remote area in the north of Isabela Island.

The results are great news for George and his species.

"There are between 1000 and 2000 tortoises on Volcano Wolf, so there is a good possibility that other hybrids or even pure Pinta individuals are alive, which is something nobody really expected," the researcher says.

This raises the possibility that George's species could be re-introduced onto Pinta Island.

"That's definitely a good possibility," he says.

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