



## FINDINGS

## A Lonesome Tortoise, and a Search for a Mate

By JOHN TIERNEY  
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It is a truth universally acknowledged, at least among humans, that a giant tortoise in the possession of the last sperm of his species must be in want of a wife. But what if the tortoise prefers a different lifestyle?

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Laurie Rosenwald

When I met Lonesome George two decades ago, in his pen on the main island of the Galápagos, I had the usual impulse to fix up the world's most famous bachelor. I chartered a fishing boat for a miserable trip out to Pinta Island, the wilderness 100 miles away where George had been discovered in 1971 living by himself.

As I fought my way through Pinta's overgrown vines and cactus pads, fervently hoping to spot a female Pinta tortoise behind a lava rock or a thorn bush, I was already working on her name. Georgette seemed too derivative. I liked the local evolutionary allusion of Darwinia, but finally settled on less of a mouthful: Eve.

I didn't find her, of course, so I went back to George's pen to bid a sad farewell to him and his species. Then I penned a long — and quite moving, I thought — contemplation of the ethics of conservation, the destructiveness of man and the meaning of life.

Now it seems the obituary was premature. I was looking on the wrong island. Last week, after sampling the genes of a few tortoises on Isabela Island, biologists announced that there is probably at least one Pinta tortoise somewhere among the thousands of tortoises there. Next year the researchers hope to find a female to take back to George's pen.

This is happy news for humanity, but not necessarily for George. We can shed a little of our collective guilt for nearly wiping out his species. George must deal with an identity crisis and performance anxiety.

## TierneyLab

What should we call Lonesome George's new love? Join the discussion.

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## Further Reading

[Lonesome George Is Not Alone among Galapagos Tortoises.](#)

Michael A. Russello, Luciano B. Beheregaray, James P. Gibbs, Thomas Fritts, Nathan Havill, Jeffrey R. Powell, and Adalgisa Caccone. *Current Biology*, May 1, 2007.

[Famous Galapagos Tortoise, Lonesome George, May Not Be Alone.](#) *ScienceDaily*, May 1, 2007

[Lonesome George: The Life and Loves of the World's Most Famous Tortoise.](#) By Henry Nicholls. (Macmillan, 2006.)

[George's Blog](#), *Firstscience.com*

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Readers who wish to contribute to the conservation effort for Lonesome George and other Galapagos tortoises can do so through the [Charles Darwin Foundation](#). A fund has also been established by the [Yale Institute for Biospheric Studies](#) to finance an expedition searching for a mate for Lonesome George on Isabela Island. Contributions can be made by clicking [here](#), choosing "Other" as the "Area," and typing "Lonesome George" as the "Purpose."



Laurie Rosenwald

What happens to his status as conservation icon — and his title as the rarest living creature? He could lose it all: his record, his name, his brand. Until now he's been the main tourist draw at the Darwin Research Station, the prime example of what fund-raisers call charismatic megafauna.

Sans pathos, will he still be lucrative? His handlers hope that a new romance will inspire even more visitors and donations, but — and this is what really worries me — there might not be much romance when Eve arrives.

George is not what you would call a stud. When I visited him in 1985, he was thought to be a relatively young adult, maybe 50 years old, but he was already a confirmed bachelor. He hadn't shown any interest in two females of a similar species placed in his pen. One had flipped over and drowned in the wading pool. The keepers weren't positive that George had driven this tortoise to her death, but he definitely hadn't been doing any Barry White serenades.

A few years later, in 1993, there was briefly a companion known as "Lonesome George's girlfriend," but she was not a tortoise. She was a 26-year-old graduate student in zoology from Switzerland named Sveva Grigioni.

By coating her hands in the genital secretions of female tortoises and gently stroking him, she managed to demonstrate a couple of times (in the course of several months' work) that George was capable of an erection. But whereas her touch could induce other male tortoises to reach orgasm within a few minutes, with George she never managed to collect any sperm.

Her ministrations — or maybe it was the pheromones in the secretions — did seem to pique George's interest in the female tortoises, as Ms. Grigioni reported to Henry Nicholls, the author of the definitive new biography, "Lonesome George: The Life and Loves of a Conservation Icon." But George's temporary interest did not translate into performance.

"He started to try copulation," Ms. Grigioni said, "but it was like he didn't really know how to."

To be fair to George, he's never been observed with a female of his race, *Geochelone nigra abingdoni*. (It has been traditionally classified a subspecies of giant tortoise, but many biologists now consider it a separate species.) After the news last week, I sought a prognosis from Ms. Grigioni on the prospects for abingdoni love.

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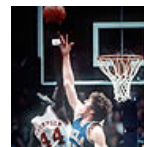
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[Will Science Come to Aid of Galapagos Bachelor? Tune In](#) (November 9, 1999)

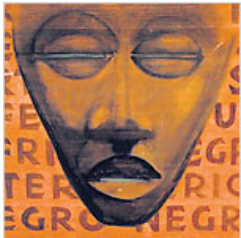
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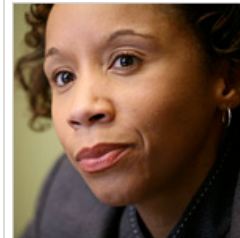


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