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Last chance looms for lonely George

By Bonnie Malkin

Last Updated: 11:01am BST 01/05/2007

Seeking: Attractive female companion to help senior male come out of his shell. Must like slow walks on the beach, eating greens and saving species from extinction. Remote locale.

It looked like a tall order, but reports from the Galapagos Islands suggest a mate for Lonesome George the giant tortoise may exist.

George - who was discovered in 1971 and is the last *Geochelone abingdoni* - is the rarest living creature on earth. Attempts to find a mate for him have so far failed miserably and if he doesn't produce offspring, his death will spell extinction for the species.

But scientists on the island say there is renewed hope for George.

A genetic survey of giant tortoises on Isabela Island - the largest in the archipelago - has shown proof another of George's species has been, and may still be, breeding.



George has so far stubbornly refused to mate

A multinational team headed by researchers at Yale has identified a tortoise which has half his genes in common with George and is "clearly a first generation hybrid between the native tortoises from the islands of Isabela and Pinta."

They hope that with further testing they will be able to find a genetically pure Pinta tortoise among the 2,000 tortoises living on Isabela and start a breeding program.

"These findings offer the potential for transforming the legacy of Lonesome George from an enduring symbol or rarity to a conservation success story," said Yale

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biologist Jeffrey Powell.

It will take a team of about 20 people around two months to carry out an exhaustive sampling and transmitter-tagging of the tortoises on the volcano and then to find the potential Pinta tortoises and bring them in captivity.

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