

The Oldest Living Reptile

Do you believe the oldest living reptile can be found in Pennsylvania? Yes it can, it is the turtle. There are fourteen different species of turtles living in Pennsylvania.

Turtles have been found in fossil records dating back two hundred and fifteen million years ago. This makes them an older fossil than any other living four legged animal. Turtles were on the earth before the first dinosaurs appeared on earth. The turtles have seen a lot of change over the last two hundred fifteen million years but they have not changed their body structure very much since they first roamed the earth. Turtles have seen the first feathered dinosaurs turn into the birds we know today. They have watched the early mammals evolve into elephants, whales, bats, and even human beings.

The reason I think turtles have existed for such a long time is because of their unique shell. Their shell protects them from predators. They can pull their head and legs into the shell to keep them safe. The turtle's shell is about one-third of the turtle's total body weight. The shell of the turtle can be bony or leathery. The shell is connected at the sides with openings for its head, tail, and legs. The shell is made up of two parts. The top of the shell is called the carapace and the bottom part of the shell is called the plastron. The shell is covered with hard scales called keratin. People's finger nails are made of keratin also. A turtle can feel pressure through its shell the same way a person can feel pressure when you press on their finger nails. Turtle shells are usually brown, black, or olive green. Some species of turtles have shells with red, orange, yellow, or grey markings and spots.

Today the turtle's main predator is humans. When people build, disturbing the turtle's habitat, the turtle has no place to go to live so they die. People also like to catch turtles

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and use their meat to make soup. They even take the baby turtle eggs to eat or sell to other people. People also kill turtles to use them to make handbags, belts, jewelry, cooking oils, and cosmetics.

In 1973 it became illegal in the United States to kill sea turtles or take their eggs. Other countries tried to protect them also. But even after these laws were put in place, the turtle population continued to drop, and all species of sea turtles are either on a threatened list or on the endangered list today.

You can help protect the turtle by doing the following things. Always keep wild turtles in the wild. Don't pollute our land and waterways. Protect the turtle's natural habitat. When you see a turtle on the road stop and move the turtle off the road so it won't get hit. Never let balloons go outside. If a balloon pops and pieces of it fall in the water a turtle may think it is a fish and eat it. The balloon could get stuck in the turtle's throat, and it can choke and die. Also, tell other people about how to protect the turtle so they can learn and more turtles will live longer lives and other turtles won't become endangered.

I became interested in turtles when I was seven years old. My Dad told me about a pet turtle he had when he was a little boy. So for my eighth birthday I asked for a pet turtle. I have now had my pet turtle for three years. He is a Red-Eared Slider and I have watched him grow from the size of a quarter to the size of the palm of my hand. I keep him in an aquarium in my bedroom. I like to watch him swim and sun himself on the rock. He stretches out his neck and legs when he sits on the rock sunning himself to stay warm.

Last year I did my science fair project on turtles and I learned information that I did not know before. I learned a group of turtles is called a bale. There are two hundred different types

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of species of turtles. Fourteen of those species live in Pennsylvania. I also learned the difference, between a turtle, a tortoise, and a terrapin. I found out where turtles like to live and what turtles like to eat. This information has made me become more interested in turtles. This past summer I went to Lake Redman fishing with my Dad. While I was there I saw red-eared sliders and a snapping turtle. If I had not learned about turtles I would not have been able to identify these turtles. The one thing I was sad to learn is that humans are the turtle's main predator. I am glad I know more about turtles so I can help protect the turtle so that it lives another two hundred and fifteen million years and continues to be the oldest living reptile still roaming the earth.

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