



Teacher text - The trail of the tortoise

Useful facts about giant tortoises and information on current issues they face on their migrations are highlighted. You may want to emphasise these to help children develop their comic strips.

A useful video clip of giant tortoise migration can also be found here:

<https://galapagosconservation.org.uk/wildlife/galapagos-giant-tortoise/>

I slowly turn my huge body around and peer into the large hole I have dug. 14 perfect tennis ball sized eggs sit snugly inside, waiting to be covered, cosy and warm under the strong equatorial sun. As I cover them up I pray they all hatch and survive to be giant tortoises, just like me. I hope the nest is hidden from nasty, smelly feral pigs that like to dig up and eat the beautiful eggs. You see, I don't look after my babies, they have to do that all on their own, from the minute they hatch out of their soft shells to fight through the soil for their first breath of Galapagos air.

Did you know these islands are named after me and my ancestors? Galápagos is the old Spanish word for tortoise, so us tortoises really think that the islands belong to us.

Suddenly I feel a rumble deep inside my stomach. It echoes through my shell (or carapace if you want to be technical!) reminding me it is time to leave. I am hungry. Hungry for tasty fresh grass and sweet fruits. It is the end of the hot season. Soon the heavy rains will end and my food will stop growing. I must leave for greener places.

I look up at the trail before me. Years and years I have followed the same path, up and down, up and down, up and down. Up to the highlands and back down to the lowlands. If I had a step counter, I am sure I would win the tortoise world book of records for marathon walking! My seasonal migration must begin.

I sigh a deep, long sigh, which takes a minute or so, as nothing I do happens very quickly. Lifting myself up on my old wrinkly legs, I slowly put one giant foot in front of the other. If I am lucky I will finish my journey in 2 weeks and take prime spot in my favourite mud pool. I love how the muddy water squishes and squelches around my tired body. Bliss.

Walking day after day, I dream of times past. I remember when our trail was just a dusty path that steadily snaked up towards the old volcanic craters. Tall trees reaching into the cool mists, bright green mosses and lichens hanging like long beards. You could walk for days and see and hear nothing but bird song and the heavy footsteps of my giant friends.



A loud noise makes me jump, well, not actually jump, because of course that would be impossible. It is the sound of a strange machine that humans use, travelling far too fast. It scares me. I pull my head into my shell for protection and wait until it has gone. I move towards the hard path that now covers our ancient trail. The humans call it a road. We call it danger.

I know I have to move as quickly as I can before the next machine comes along. I start to cross. My feet don't like the hot, hard surface and my carapace feels heavy. Halfway across I see another machine flying towards me. It isn't slowing down. What shall I do? With an almighty tortoise tug, I heave myself to the edge of the road. Just in time. The machine narrowly misses my tail. Phew! My heart beats quickly.

As I move away from the road to safety I hear a gentle patter on my carapace. I stretch my head out of my shell and feel the soft drizzly rain on my dry skin. I close my tiny eyes and rest for a while. I know I am close to the end of my journey.

After a few hours I continue, but not before I have a tasty fruit snack to keep me going. I take a huge, slow bite of a sweet passion fruit. The seeds squirt out and run down my neck. Delicious!

I hear on the tortoise grapevine that we are being blamed for helping spread invasive plant species. You see, when we poop, some of the seeds from the tasty fruits we have eaten are pooped out too. They can stay in my belly for a while and by then I have travelled further into the highlands. Well, if humans will plant delicious fruits along my migration route, I will eat them! It is not our fault!



Photo © Christian Ziegler

I must be close now. I can smell the sweet, damp earth. But wait! What is that ahead of me? Some strange structure blocks my way. Slowly, I look left and right. It seems to travel as far as I can see. Beyond it there are huge cows munching on fresh

grasses. It must be a fence that farmers have put up to keep their cattle in. Did they not realise this is an old tortoise migration route?

Lowering my carapace I stare grumpily at the fence. I cannot barge through it. The wires may get caught up in my shell. Just as I am wondering what to do I hear a loud grunting nearby. A tortoise I recognise from the mud pools is pushing his way through a broken section of the fence. He batters it with his enormous body and strength. As it gives way he almost rolls onto his back with the effort. A huge gap opens up. My way through!

At last! I can see the mud pool in the distance. I have made it! Here I will be able to do my favourite pastime – dozing for up to 16 hours a day, knowing I am safe until I feel the seasons change again and I have to make my return journey. Who knows what will have changed by then? I will cross my tortoise toes for a safe return. Until then, I am off for a well-earned mud bath!



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