



# AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

**Media Inquiries:** Kendra Snyder, Department of Communications  
212-496-3419; [ksnyder@amnh.org](mailto:ksnyder@amnh.org)  
[www.amnh.org](http://www.amnh.org)

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## **ICONIC TORTOISE LONESOME GEORGE ON EXHIBIT AT AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**

**SEPTEMBER 19, 2014, TO JANUARY 4, 2015**

**TAXIDERMY MOUNT OF LAST PINTA ISLAND TORTOISE ON LIMITED VIEW**

### **LONESOME GEORGE UNDERSCORES IMPORTANCE OF GLOBAL CONSERVATION**

Lonesome George, the world-famous Pinta Island tortoise who was the last of his kind and became a global icon for conservation, will be on view for a limited time at the American Museum of Natural History. When he died in 2012 in the Galapagos Islands, Lonesome George was preserved by an expert taxidermy and conservation team in consultation with Museum scientists. The taxidermy mount will be on exhibit until January 4, 2015, before being returned to Ecuador as part of that country's national patrimony.

"Lonesome George's passing and his ongoing role as a powerful symbol present a rare and important teaching opportunity – a moment of heightened public attention to the continuing reality of species extinction," said Ellen V. Futter, President of the American Museum of Natural History. "Preserving this magnificent creature, telling his story, and displaying him allow us to further the conversation with our visitors about species extinction and the urgency of environmental conservation."

"Ecuador fought to preserve this species but time won the battle," said Lorena Tapia, Ecuador's Minister of the Environment. "Lonesome George's death has inspired us to strive for a better future for the planet and to correct mistakes humans caused over time. His story has touched hearts around the world, has served as a source of hope, and motivates us to fight harder for conservation in the future."

Weighing about 165 pounds and measuring 5 feet long, Lonesome George (*Chelonoidis abingdoni*) was probably the most famous and most photographed giant tortoise

in the world. Around the time of naturalist Charles Darwin's famed 1835 voyage to the Galapagos, a chain of volcanic islands in South America, Pinta Island was home to thousands of tortoises like George. But by the early 1900s, the species was thought to have become extinct, a result of centuries of being hunted for meat and tortoise oil, which was used for fuel. So it was a great surprise when, in 1971, a Hungarian scientist spotted Lonesome George on Pinta Island.

"The discovery of Lonesome George was electrifying," said Johannah Barry, President of Galapagos Conservancy. "There was now renewed hope of resurrecting his species and reversing the unfortunate history of Pinta Island."

A year after his discovery, George was taken to the Charles Darwin Research Station on nearby Santa Cruz Island, where he lived for the next 40 years at the Tortoise Breeding and Rearing Center, now administered by the Galapagos National Park Service. Despite efforts to provide him with a mate from closely related species, George never successfully reproduced and remained the last known member of his species. He died of natural causes in June 2012.

At the time of Lonesome George's death, Eleanor Sterling, former director and now chief conservation scientist of the Museum's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, was in the Galapagos for an education and outreach workshop with colleagues at the Galapagos National Park Service, the SUNY College of Environmental Sciences and Forestry, and the Galapagos Conservancy. The colleagues worked together to carefully pack George's body for shipment first to the Museum for an assessment by conservation experts and then to Wildlife Preservations, a taxidermy studio in Woodland Park, NJ.

"It is quite rare for the extinction of a species to be associated with one particular member," Sterling said. "Lonesome George is a charismatic icon for conservation, and telling his story helps us to understand not only the impact of humans on biodiversity, but also our responsibility as stewards of other species. At the Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, we work with partners around the world to address the loss of biological diversity, and our long-standing collaborations and partnerships with scientists working in the Galapagos Islands have resulted in important findings about the critical roles that giant tortoises play in their ecosystems, from controlling invasive vegetation to dispersing native seeds. I hope that George's story, and his unique ability to capture the public's attention

both in life and in death, serve as a catalyst for widespread support of conservation efforts in the Galapagos and beyond.”

Over the last two years, Wildlife Preservations taxidermy experts, led by George Dante, have worked closely with Sterling, Museum Herpetology Department curator Christopher Raxworthy, and their colleagues to preserve Lonesome George as he appeared in life—down to the missing toenail on his left front foot. The taxidermy mount, displayed in a case that measures 6 feet wide, 4 feet deep, and 7 feet tall, shows the tremendous height George could achieve by extending his neck and limbs.

“Enormous effort has gone into ensuring the scientific accuracy of the taxidermy work, which was challenging due to the many unique features of giant tortoises,” Raxworthy said. “The precise posture is based on carefully selected reference images, the shell and skin colorations have been calibrated using reference soil samples, and messy green plant stains have been added to Lonesome George’s beak and chin, exactly as he had, after enjoying every meal.”

The Galapagos Islands were once home to more than 200,000 tortoises comprising at least 14 different species. Four species have gone extinct in the last 200 years, but an estimated 20,000 individuals still live there today, and their numbers are increasing. Pinta Island is now a protected area; no tourists are allowed, few scientists visit, and conservation efforts are underway to restore the natural ecosystem. Goats, one of the non-native species on the island, were eradicated from Pinta Island in 2004, and natural vegetation rebounded quickly.

Lonesome George is presented in collaboration with the Galapagos National Park Directorate and Galapagos Conservancy.

#### **AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (AMNH.ORG)**

The American Museum of Natural History, founded in 1869, is one of the world’s preeminent scientific, educational, and cultural institutions. The Museum encompasses 45 permanent exhibition halls, including the Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Hayden Planetarium, as well as galleries for temporary exhibitions. It is home to the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, New York State’s official memorial to its 33rd governor and the nation’s 26th president, and a tribute to Roosevelt’s enduring legacy of conservation. The Museum’s five

active research divisions and three cross-disciplinary centers support 200 scientists, whose work draws on a world-class permanent collection of more than 32 million specimens and artifacts, as well as specialized collections for frozen tissue and genomic and astrophysical data, and one of the largest natural history libraries in the world. Through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, it is the only American museum authorized to grant the Ph.D. degree. In 2012, the Museum began offering a pilot Master of Arts in Teaching program with a specialization in Earth science. Approximately 5 million visitors from around the world came to the Museum last year, and its exhibitions and Space Shows can be seen in venues on five continents. The Museum's website and collection of apps for mobile devices extend its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs to millions more beyond its walls. Visit [amnh.org](http://amnh.org) for more information.

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