



*** EMBARGOED UNTIL FRIDAY, FEB. 20 AT ~4:00 PM ET**

Floreana Giant Tortoise Returns Home

Executive Summary

The Floreana tortoise went extinct in the mid-1800's. One of the last known observations of the Floreana tortoise dates back to Charles Darwin's famous visit to the Galápagos.

This February, after more than 180 years of absence, giant tortoises are returning to Floreana Island in the Galapagos. On February 20, 2026, 158 young Floreana-lineage giant tortoises will be released into their ancestral habitat, marking a historic milestone in global conservation and ecological restoration.

This release is part of the Floreana Ecological Restoration Project, with Galápagos Conservancy serving as a long-term conservation partner that supports on-the-ground implementation, applied science, and monitoring, while helping secure the sustained investment required to restore an inhabited island at scale. It marks the first of 12 locally extinct species to be reintroduced as part of a multi-decade effort to restore one of the most heavily altered islands in the Galápagos.

This milestone builds on more than two decades of genetic and field discovery that reopened the door to Floreana's recovery. In 2000, a Galápagos Conservancy expedition reported evidence that Floreana tortoises may still exist on Wolf Volcano, Isabela Island. That finding helped catalyze a focused effort to establish a pathway for restoring Floreana-lineage tortoises. Dr. James Gibbs, Vice President of Science and Conservation at Galápagos Conservancy, has helped advance the field and science work that turned that opportunity into a viable restoration program.

The return of the Floreana Giant Tortoise is not simply symbolic. As a keystone species and ecosystem engineer, tortoises help regenerate native habitats by dispersing seeds, shaping vegetation, and restoring ecological processes that benefit many other species. Their reintroduction signals that years of invasive species control, habitat recovery, and community engagement are working.

This moment positions Floreana as a global model for restoring inhabited islands and demonstrates what is possible when science, conservation, and local communities work together.

Why This Matters

A Keystone Species Returns

Giant tortoises shape landscapes. By grazing, trampling, and dispersing seeds across long distances, they help maintain diverse plant communities and regenerate degraded habitats. Their

absence fundamentally altered Floreana's ecosystems. Their return restores a missing ecological process that supports broader recovery across the island

This is the first time in more than 180 years that Floreana-lineage giant tortoises will walk their native soil. It marks the beginning of a new chapter for the island's ecological recovery.

Proof of Progress

Floreana was one of the first inhabited islands in the Galápagos. Introduced species and poaching caused severe biodiversity loss, including the giant tortoise, leading to the local extinction of at least 13 endemic species and leaving more than 50 species threatened today. This release confirms that sustained invasive species control and habitat restoration can reverse damage, even on inhabited islands. This work was carried out by the Floreana Ecological Restoration Project, led by the Galápagos National Park Directorate and the Galápagos Biosecurity and Quarantine Agency, and co-executed with Fundación Jocotoco, Charles Darwin Foundation, and Island Conservation.

A Global Model for Inhabited Islands

Most islands worldwide are inhabited, and many face the same pressures as Floreana. Floreana demonstrates that ecological restoration can coexist with human communities. Lessons learned here will inform island restoration efforts worldwide.

The Release at a Glance

- **Number of tortoises released:** 156 juveniles, aged 12 to 14 years
- **Future releases:** Approximately 25 to 100 tortoises per year over the coming decades, totaling approximately 700 individuals
- **Release area:** Northern Floreana Island (exact site undisclosed for animal safety)
- **Timing:** Coordinated with the rainy season to maximize food availability and successful establishment

Science-Driven and Carefully Timed

The release follows more than 15 years of preparation, including habitat assessment, invasive species control, genetic research, and health screening.

The tortoises released are large enough to withstand current invasive predators. Rats and feral cats prey on hatchlings, and are expected to be fully eradicated before these tortoises reach reproductive age in 15 to 20 years. This phased approach allows restoration to move forward while risks are actively managed.

Each tortoise carries a lightweight GPS transmitter, allowing researchers to track movements, health, and habitat use in real time. This monitoring will guide adaptive management and strengthen long-time success.

About the Tortoises

Are these pure Floreana giant tortoises?

No confirmed pure Floreana giant tortoises exist today. The tortoises being released are Floreana-lineage hybrids, descended from the extinct Floreana species and a closely related population found on Wolf Volcano on neighboring Isabela Island.

These tortoises are similar in size, behavior, and shell type to the original species and are expected to fulfill the same ecosystem functions. Restoration focuses on ecological recovery, not perfect genetic replication.

Where did they come from?

Historical records show tortoises were frequently moved between islands by whalers and sailors, helping explain why Floreana ancestry persisted in tortoises on Wolf Volcano. Conservation scientists identified individuals carrying substantial Floreana ancestry and established a breeding program at Galapagos Conservancy's breeding center on Santa Cruz Island.

How long were they raised in managed care?

The tortoises being released are 12 to 14 years old and have spent their time growing under managed care at the breeding center before reaching a safe size for release.

Measuring Success

Success will be measured through:

- **Ecological indicators:** vegetation recovery, seed dispersal, and species rebound
- **Animal health and survival:** GPS tracking, movement patterns, and annual health checks
- **Community well-being:** coexistence outcomes, livelihoods, and sustainable tourism opportunities
- **Long-term sustainability:** biosecurity systems and continued invasive species control

Community at the Center

The Floreana community has been involved throughout the restoration process. While concerns remain, particularly around agriculture, most residents support the return of tortoises as part of a shared vision for a healthy ecosystem and sustainable local economy. Over time, local residents will become key stewards of the growing tortoise population, as they already are on other Galápagos Islands.

What Comes Next

This release is the beginning, not the end. Additional tortoises will be released annually as conditions allow. Over time, the population will transition from managed releases to natural reproduction on Floreana.

The Embargo:

All information about the number of tortoises being released and the location is embargoed from publication until February 20, 2026 at approximately 4:00 pm ET, as directed by the Galápagos National Park Directorate.

Visual Assets

Press materials, photos, and video will be available on February 20, 2026.

Embargoed interviews and background briefings with Dr. James Gibbs, Vice President of Science and Conservation at Galápagos Conservancy or Hugo Mogollón, Chief Executive Officer and President at Galápagos Conservancy, can be arranged.

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