



Environmental Adaptations of the Desert Tortoise

The desert tortoise has made many adaptations to its home environment. One adaptation has been to the climatic extremes of the desert. While temperatures can exceed 140° F in the summer, winter temperatures can plunge below freezing. As a result, the desert tortoise builds subterranean burrows and spends 95% of its life in them. The burrows protect the tortoise from the intense heat in the summer and subfreezing temperatures while it is dormant in the winter.

The tortoise has also adapted its diet to this habitat. Grasses, some shrubs, and new growth on cacti along with their flowers make up most of the desert tortoise's diet. When sufficient rainfall causes massive wildflower growth, the tortoise consumes large quantities of the flowers.

Finally, the desert tortoise has adapted to the infrequent rainfall in the desert. The moisture in the grasses and flowers the tortoise consumes makes up most of its water intake. Another source of water is catchment basins that tortoises build in the soil to catch rainfall. They remember the location of the basins and wait near them when rain appears imminent. In addition, an adult tortoise can survive a year without water.