

Reading Comprehension — The Living Fossil

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The Living Fossil

On a few protected islands off the coast of New Zealand lives a creature that looks like a small lizard but is far stranger and far older. It is the tuatara, and scientists sometimes call it a 'living fossil'.

The tuatara may look like a lizard, but it is not one. It is the last survivor of a group of reptiles that lived alongside the dinosaurs. Its relatives died out millions of years ago, yet the tuatara has barely changed in over 200 million years. When you look at a tuatara, you are looking at a creature from the age of the dinosaurs.

The tuatara has some remarkable features. It can live for a very long time — well over 100 years — and it grows very slowly. It is most active in cool weather, unlike most reptiles, which prefer the heat. It even has a strange 'third eye' on the top of its head when young, which can sense light, though it becomes covered over as the animal grows.

Sadly, tuatara once lived all over New Zealand, but introduced animals such as rats hunted them and their eggs. Today they survive mainly on predator-free islands, where they are carefully protected.

The tuatara is a living link to the distant past — a reminder of just how unique New Zealand's wildlife really is.

Questions

1. Where do tuatara live today? (1 mark)
2. What are tuatara sometimes called? (1 mark)
3. Is the tuatara a lizard? (1 mark)
4. Find and copy a word in paragraph 3 meaning "surviving for a very long time." (Accept a close phrase.) (1 mark)
5. Why is the tuatara called a 'living fossil'? (2 marks)
6. Give two ways the tuatara is unusual. (2 marks)
7. Why do tuatara now live mainly on predator-free islands? (2 marks)
8. Summarise what makes the tuatara so special. (3 marks)

Answer Key / Mark Scheme

1. On a few protected (predator-free) islands off New Zealand.
2. A 'living fossil'.
3. No, it is not a lizard.

4. "live for a very long time" / accept reference to long-lived.
5. Because it has barely changed in over 200 million years and is the last of reptiles that lived with the dinosaurs.
6. Any two: lives over 100 years; grows slowly; active in cool weather; has a 'third eye' when young.
7. Introduced animals like rats hunted them and their eggs, so they are protected on predator-free islands.
8. It is the last survivor of a dinosaur-age group, almost unchanged in 200+ million years, very long-lived and unusual — a living link to the past found only in New Zealand.