



# TUATARA

**ALTHOUGH EXTERNALLY VERY** lizard-like, this two-foot reptile is the only surviving member of a distinct order of reptiles, Rhynchocephalia, a very diverse and widespread group 70 million to 195 million years ago during the Mesozoic Era.

The tuatara (*Sphenodon guntheri* and *S. punctatus*) originally was described in the early 1830s as a member of the lizard order, but later the distinctiveness of the tuatara was recognized and a separate order was erected for it and its fossil relatives.

The tuatara's skeleton differs from that of all other living reptiles in that the tip of the upper jaw overhangs the

lower, forming a small, beak-like point. This feature gave rise to the common term "beak-heads" for this order.

Additional specimens resulted in the description of other species. By 1990, modern systematic techniques had characterized two extant species and one extinct species and had determined that the surviving populations were greatly reduced in numbers and distribution, some going extinct as recently as 1970.

Although confined to small islands off the coast of New Zealand—*S. guntheri* is found only on a single islet—no data clarify the original range of tuataras. They were important animals, however, in the culture of indigenous New Zealanders, and their prevalence in art and legend of Maori people there suggests that tuataras had been much

more abundant and widely distributed.

The decline of tuataras is directly related to habitat destruction by Europeans and predation by animals they introduced—rats, cats and pigs.

However, extinction of at least one species predated European arrival, suggesting that other factors may have been involved. It is remarkable that all tuataras survived, considering that all other members of the order had been extinct for tens of millions of years.

The few remaining tuataras cling to existence on tiny bleak islands where they share burrows with sea birds, finding sustenance and shelter from the outside world.

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