

THE REUNION GIANT TORTOISE IN THE POT

## LA TORTUE GÉANTE DE BOURBON À LA MARMITE

Avant même l'installation des premiers habitants, les marins des navires de passage embarquaient vivantes les grosses tortues prélevées autour de l'étang de St-Paul.

L'installation des premiers habitants à l'embouchure n'est pas un hasard : l'étang est très poissonneux et les tortues abondent. Est-ce l'impression d'avoir à disposition une ressource illimitée qui a conduit à l'extinction de la tortue géante de Bourbon ?



Even before the days of the first settlers, sailors on passing vessels caught giant tortoises alive from the area around the lagoon of Saint-Paul. The establishment of early settlers around the outlet did not happen by chance: the lagoon was abundant in fish, and tortoises were plentiful. This impression of an unlimited resource may well have contributed to the extinction of the Réunion giant tortoise.

Crews of passing vessels made ample use of this resource. For early generations of settlers on La Réunion, the tortoise became "the most commonplace food of the islanders". It was even used as a cure for numerous diseases. Due to their large size, these tortoises were able to carry people, hence the application of the term "Carriages" by the French in the 17th century. The relationship between the number of inhabitants and the disappearance of land tortoises is striking:

- 1666 → 20 habitants → Deux millions de tortues
- 1689 → 314 habitants → Il faut aller les chercher à La Possession ou Boucan-Carot
- 1717 → 1 200 habitants → C'est maintenant à St Leu qu'il faut aller les chercher !
- 1777 → 37 000 habitants → Disparition complète du littoral !!
- 1840 → 96 000 habitants → Extinction complète

TORTOISES UNDONE BY THEIR OWN QUALITIES  
"This island is not inhabited, but provides a source of victuals; tortoises, fish and birds are present in great abundance"  
Log of the Middleburg, a vessel commanded by Dutch Admiral Verhooven, 1611

RIDDLE  
I carry my shell on my back and I leave a silver trail – what am I?  
Answer: A snail... the Réunion giant tortoise left no silver trail

Enfants et hommes posant avec une tortue géante devant un bâtiment, 1870, Archives Départementales de La Réunion.

Men and children posing with a giant tortoise in front of a building, 1870, Departmental Archives of La Réunion.