12. 18: Reptile Ecology

Where do reptiles live?

Anywhere and everywhere. Shown here is a sea turtle. Obviously, this reptile lives in the ocean. But reptiles can also live in the desert, jungle, forest, or even your backyard. Reptiles live in practically every type of habitat.

Ecology of Reptiles

Today, reptiles live in a wide range of habitats. They can be found on every continent except Antarctica. Many turtles live in the ocean, while others live in freshwater or on land. Lizards are all terrestrial, but their habitats may range from deserts to rainforests, and from underground burrows to the tops of trees. Most snakes are terrestrial and live in a wide
range of habitats, but some snakes are aquatic. Crocodilians live in and around swamps or bodies of freshwater or salt water.

**Reptile Diets**

What reptiles eat is also very diverse, but the majority of reptiles are carnivores. Large reptiles such as crocodilians are the top predators in their ecosystems, preying on birds, fish, deer, turtles, and sometimes domestic livestock. Their powerful jaws can crush bones and even turtle shells. Smaller reptiles—including tuataras, snakes, and many lizards—are also important predators, preying on insects, frogs, birds, and small mammals such as mice.

Most terrestrial turtles are herbivores. They graze on grasses, leaves, flowers, and fruits. Marine turtles and some species of lizards are omnivores, feeding on plants as well as insects, worms, amphibians, and small fish.

**Reptiles at Risk**

Many species of reptiles, especially marine reptiles, are at risk of extinction. Some are threatened by habitat loss. For example, many beaches where turtles lay their eggs have been taken over and developed by people. Other marine reptiles have been over-hunted by humans. Marine turtles and their eggs are still eaten in some countries despite being protected species.

Some reptiles are preyed upon by non-native species introduced by humans. For example, marine iguanas on the Galápagos Islands are threatened by dogs and cats that people have brought to the islands. The iguanas are slow and tame and have no adaptations to these new predators.

**Summary**

- Reptiles can be found on every continent except Antarctica.
- Reptiles may live in terrestrial, freshwater, or marine habitats.
- Most reptiles are carnivores, and large reptiles are the top predators in their ecosystems.
- Many species of reptiles, especially marine reptiles, are at risk of extinction.

**Review**

1. Describe the habitats of most lizards.
2. What do reptiles eat? Describe the diet of a crocodilian.
3. Why are some reptiles at risk?

**Explore More**

Use this resource to answer the questions that follow.
1. What makes a good meal for giant anaconda?
2. How do anaconda sense their prey?
3. Describe how anaconda hunt and kill their prey.
4. Why is a good meal important for anaconda?
5. How long may a pregnant female anaconda go between meals?
6. How long might it take an anaconda to ingest and digest a large meal?