

Save The Tortoises

Egyptian Naani

The Egyptian Tortoise



Samy Zalat

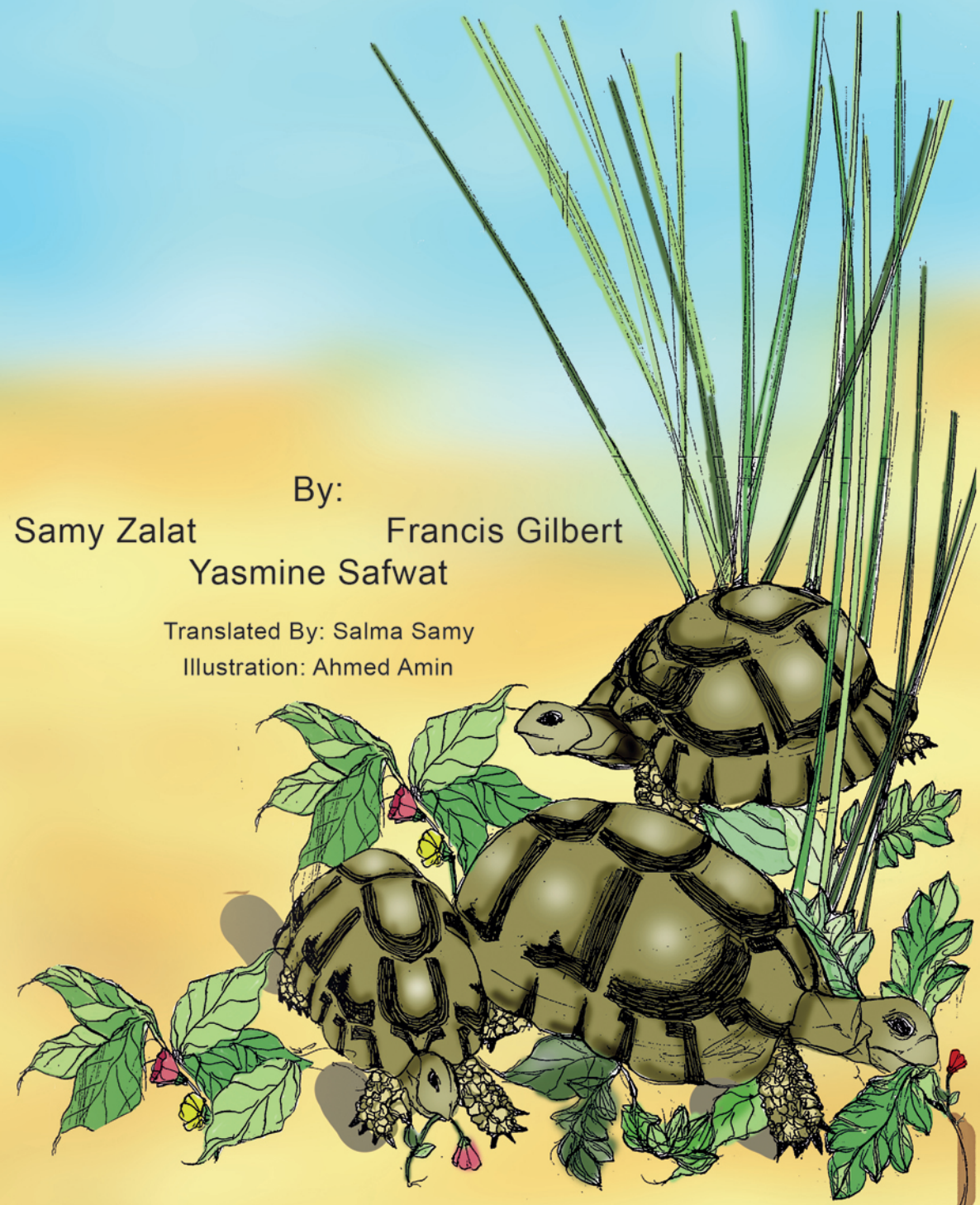
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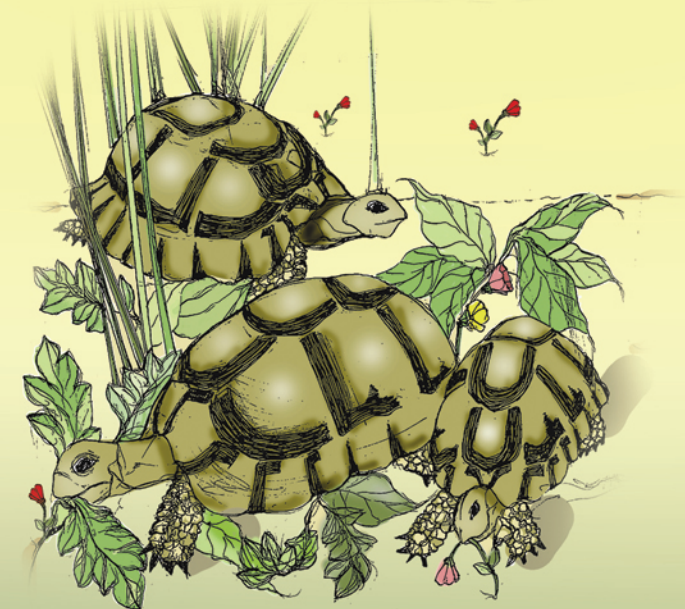
In 2006 the United Nations and Egypt celebrated world Environment Day, focused on "Deserts and Desertification". We welcome children and young people to this story about the Egyptian tortoise and the threats to which it is subject. The story highlights the efforts of the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs in conserving this tortoise and its unique habitat. It also has interesting extra information about the tortoise life history. We hope young readers will enjoy it, and join with us, convinced and full of enthusiasm for conserving the environment in the Protected Areas, and participating in the different environmental activities we implement.

Minister of Environmental Affairs

Eng. Maged George

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My name is Naany, that is what my friends call me. My original name is Kleinmanni, but that is difficult to say. My grandparents told me that in 1883, the first individual of our species was discovered in Alexandria by Mr. Kleinman while on a walk. Happy with his find, he took her to his French taxonomist friend, Louis. He published the first-ever birth certificate for us, giving us the scientific name Kleinmanni as a mark of respect for his friend and our discoverer.

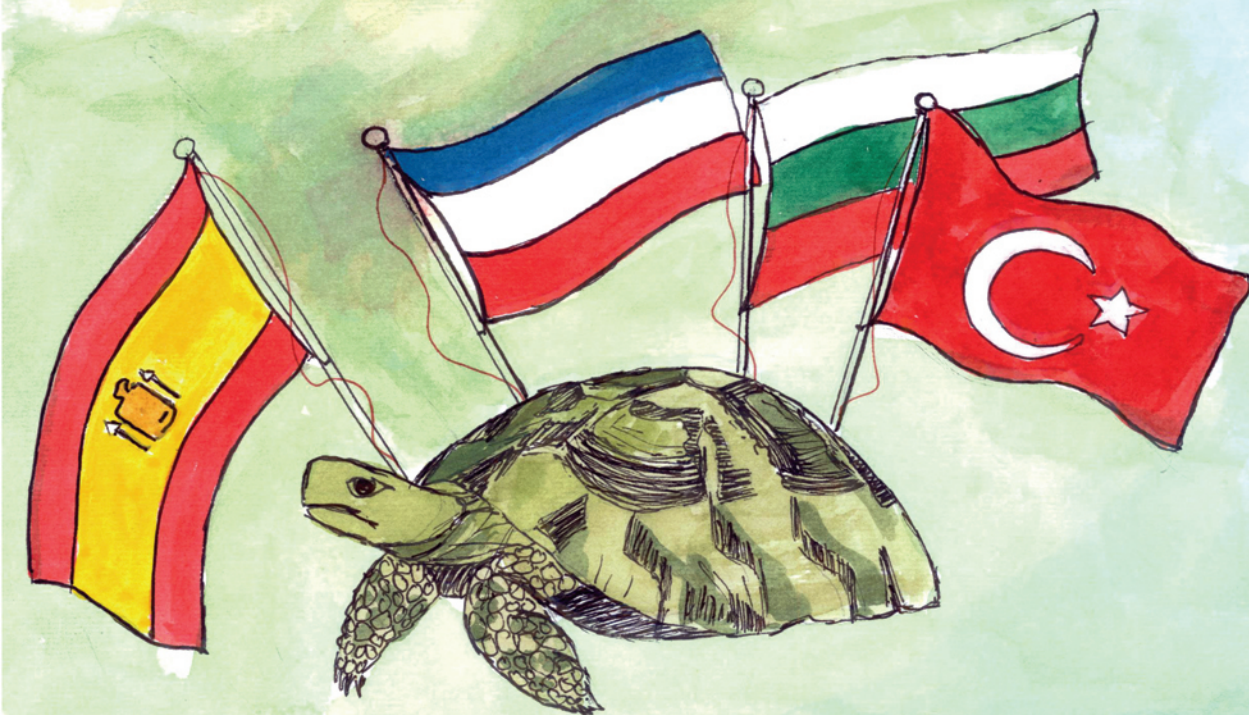
In Arabic, my name is the "Egyptian Tortoise" or "alsohefah almasria". My body is small and light yellow in colour. The biggest female of our species is about 13 cm long, and the biggest male is 9 cm. We are one of the smallest species in the world.

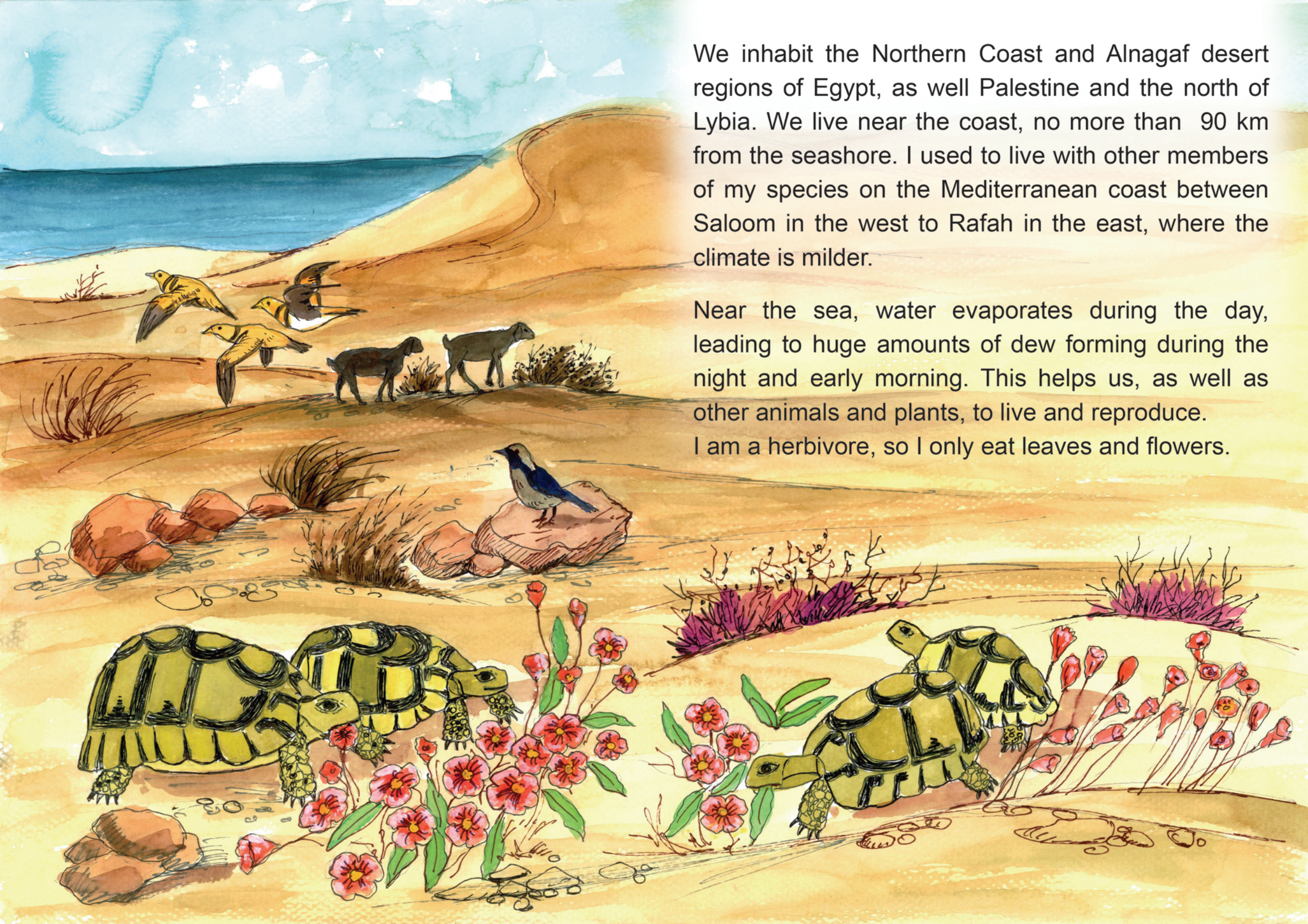




There are only four other tortoise species of the genus "Testudo" in the whole world: the Greek tortoise, the Russian tortoise, Herrman's tortoise and the Marginated tortoise.

We are different shapes, sizes and colours, but all have an outer shell, as hard as iron, covering our bodies. This protects us from our enemies and unsuitable climatic conditions. Our slow movement is well known and often used in proverbs to symbolize low speed. We only have a limited distribution in North Africa, Europe and some regions of Asia.





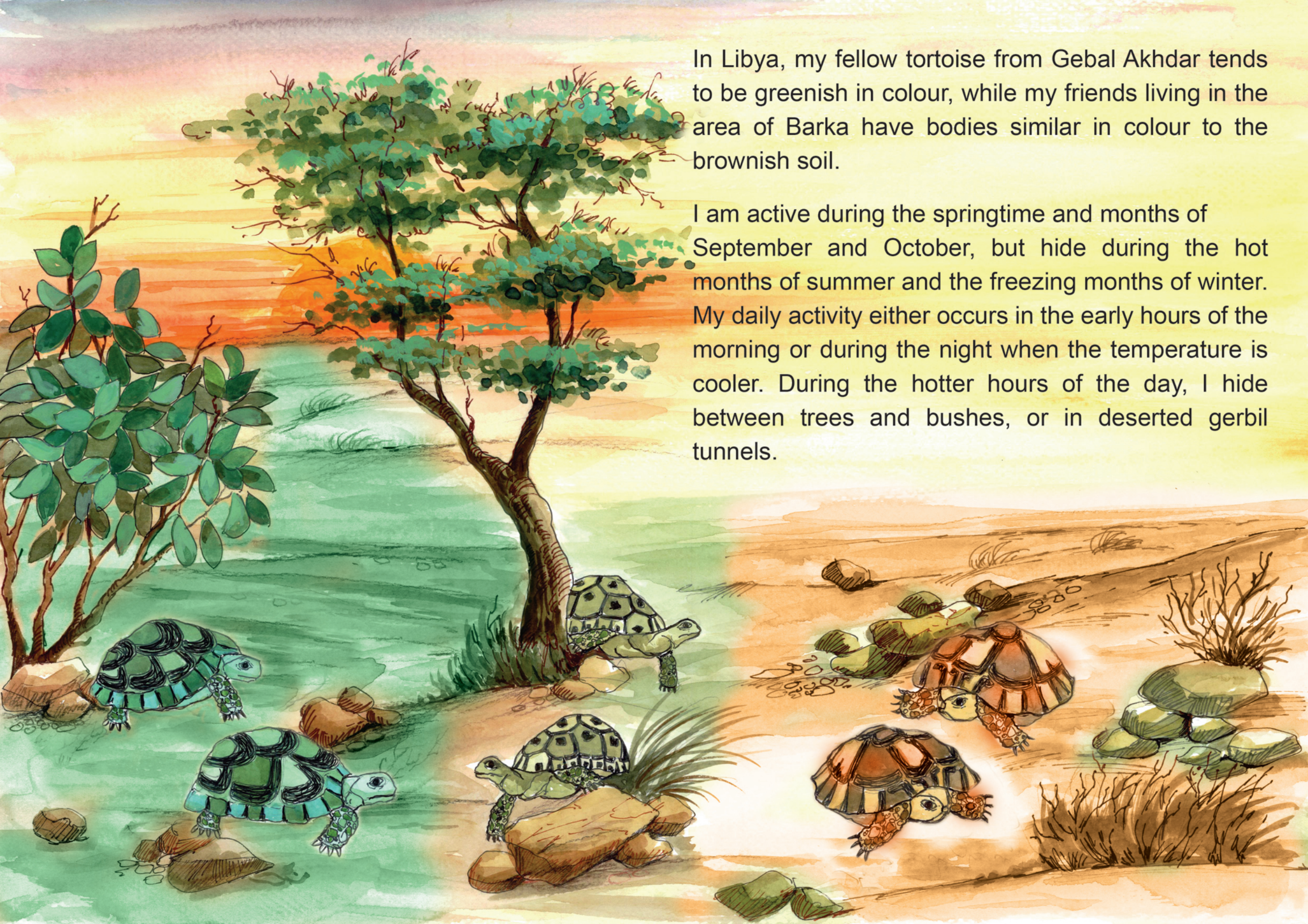
We inhabit the Northern Coast and Alnagaf desert regions of Egypt, as well Palestine and the north of Lybia. We live near the coast, no more than 90 km from the seashore. I used to live with other members of my species on the Mediterranean coast between Saloom in the west to Rafah in the east, where the climate is milder.

Near the sea, water evaporates during the day, leading to huge amounts of dew forming during the night and early morning. This helps us, as well as other animals and plants, to live and reproduce.

I am a herbivore, so I only eat leaves and flowers.

In Libya, my fellow tortoise from Gebal Akhdar tends to be greenish in colour, while my friends living in the area of Barka have bodies similar in colour to the brownish soil.

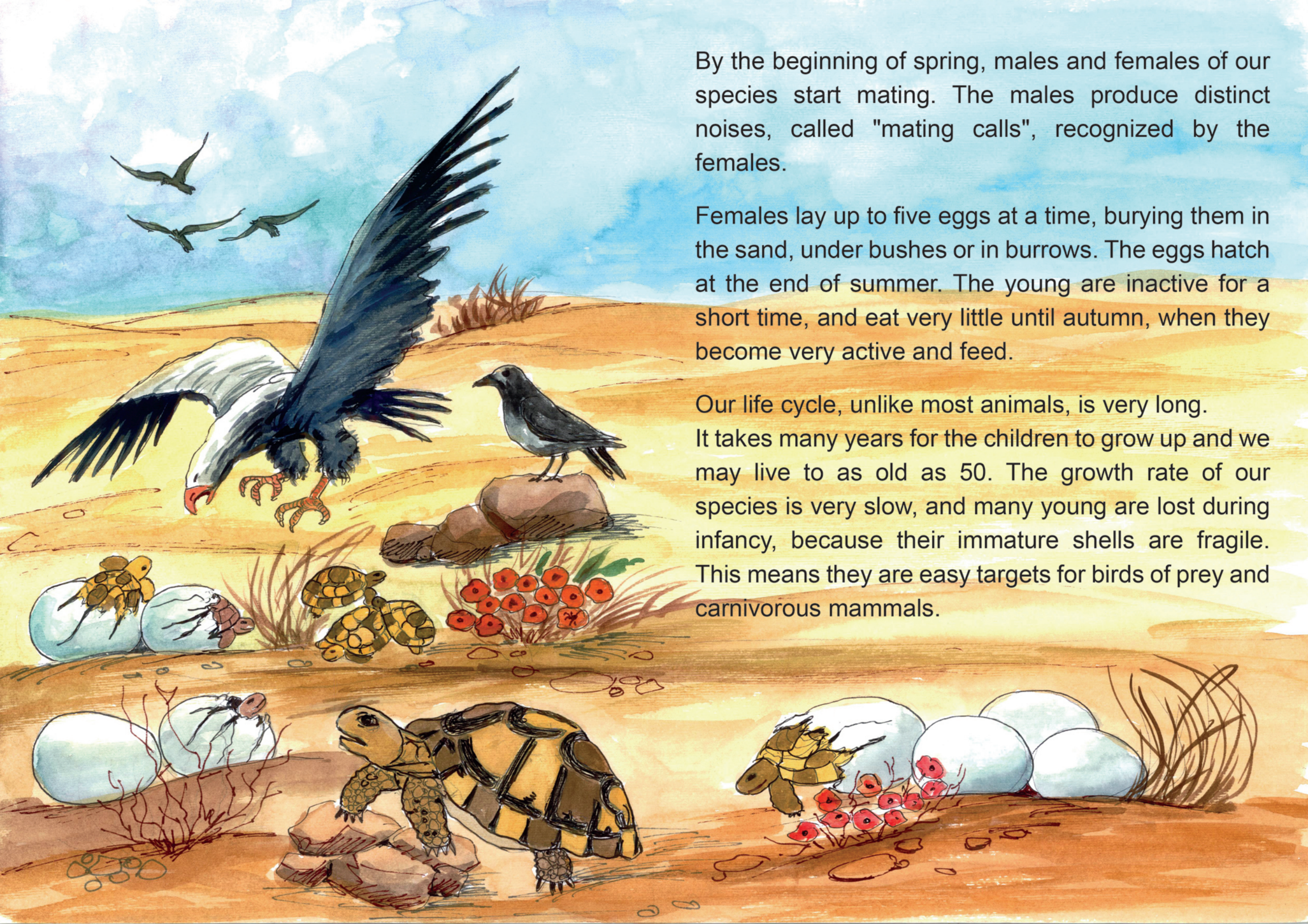
I am active during the springtime and months of September and October, but hide during the hot months of summer and the freezing months of winter. My daily activity either occurs in the early hours of the morning or during the night when the temperature is cooler. During the hotter hours of the day, I hide between trees and bushes, or in deserted gerbil tunnels.



By the beginning of spring, males and females of our species start mating. The males produce distinct noises, called "mating calls", recognized by the females.

Females lay up to five eggs at a time, burying them in the sand, under bushes or in burrows. The eggs hatch at the end of summer. The young are inactive for a short time, and eat very little until autumn, when they become very active and feed.

Our life cycle, unlike most animals, is very long. It takes many years for the children to grow up and we may live to as old as 50. The growth rate of our species is very slow, and many young are lost during infancy, because their immature shells are fragile. This means they are easy targets for birds of prey and carnivorous mammals.





Once upon a time, while I was walking around my house on the Northern Coast at night, I met some of my friends.

It made me happy to see them all gathered there in this manner, so I went over and we started to talk:

Naany: "why are you all here?"

"To answer you, we all need to tell you our life stories."

Naany: "I'm all ears, I would love to hear them."

A little tortoise with a pale shell started:

"One day, my friends and I were playing on the seashore, when suddenly, a human being came over and kidnapped us all. He put us in a cloth bag filled with other animals, such as frogs, snakes, mice and others. We were taken on a very long, tiring journey, causing many deaths along the way. He finally handed us to a pet shop in a noisy market, where we were kept in filthy, smelly cages with no food and poor care. More of our group died here.

I was sold for less than 10 pounds, a very low price. I felt very sick and dizzy at the time. I was kept in a house for three days, unable to walk or eat. After this, the man set me free in a hilly area where the heat was unbearable. After spending four nights in this place, suffering from disease and expecting to die at any moment, a man found me and brought me here to give me medical care and food."

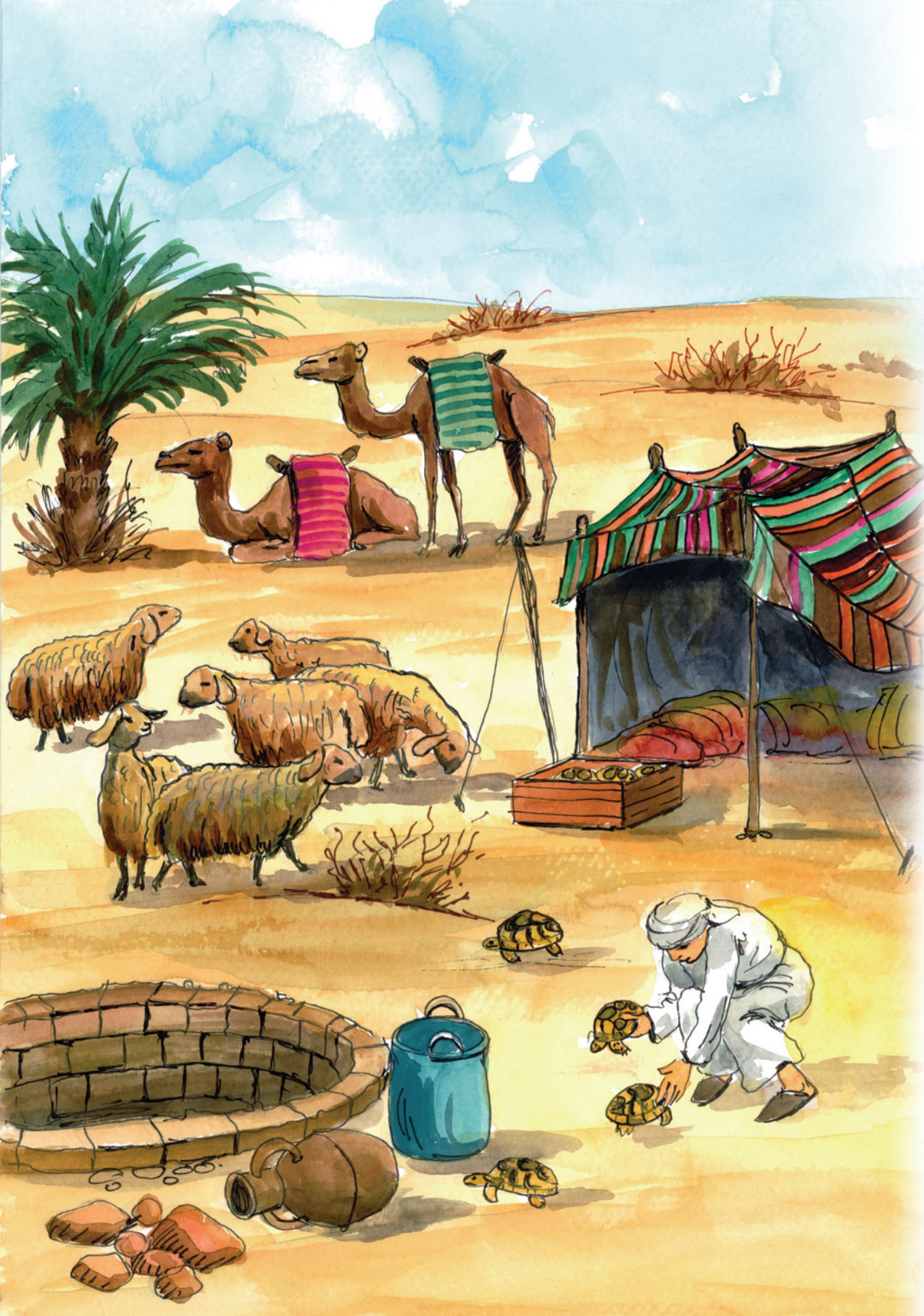


As soon as the little tortoise finished her story, another wide-eyed tortoise started his:

"I used to live on my family's land, a wonderful spot on the Mediterranean coast between Alexandria and Marsa Matrouh.

I remember when my friends and I used to play, talk and have fun on the seashore, under the moonlight, hearing the melody of the waves. All of a sudden, the area began to shake. A huge number of trucks filled with sand, bricks, cement and people arrived. They then started to build houses and beach cabins all along the coast. The construction continued day after day until almost all of the Mediterranean coast was built up. Many members of my family were killed. Our houses on higher land and hills, and under trees and bushes, were reduced to rubble. Other survivors and I suffered due to this terrible crisis that affected the existence of our species.

"We were not able to adapt to our new circumstances and the constant activity. Due to the moving cars and bright lights everywhere, even more tortoises lost their lives. Some friends and I hid in an old abandoned gerbil hole. We were waiting for our last moment to arrive, but instead, a hand reached in, grabbed us, and brought us here where we were cared for and fed.



Naany: "These stories shock me, I never thought that humans would destroy the land God granted them, without even considering the other creatures."

Another tortoise, talking with great difficulty, stuttered:

"You shouldn't be surprised, this is the way humans behave when they seek their own benefits and needs.

They do not respect or think of others and my story proves it: When I was young, my friends and I came to the attention of a shepherd in the coastal area near Arish. He caught us and took us home to his family. I may have been young, but I will never forget what I saw.

"A member of his family slaughtered one of my sisters. They then mixed her remains with some wild herbs to make what they call a 'remedy', and they started drinking the mixture daily. They believe it makes them more fertile. They also believe that we bring them good luck. That is why they lock us up in their walled houses."

"I was depressed for a long time and remained silent with no food until the day of my escape. I got my chance when the little girl carried me outside to play. She was looking after the goat and was not paying any attention to me, so I ran away into the desert. A passer-by came by and picked me up to bring me here where there is plenty of care and food.



Naany: "It seems to me that these people that brought you here have something in common. Can any of you tell me who they are and why they did this?"

An old wrinkled tortoise replied in a low voice:

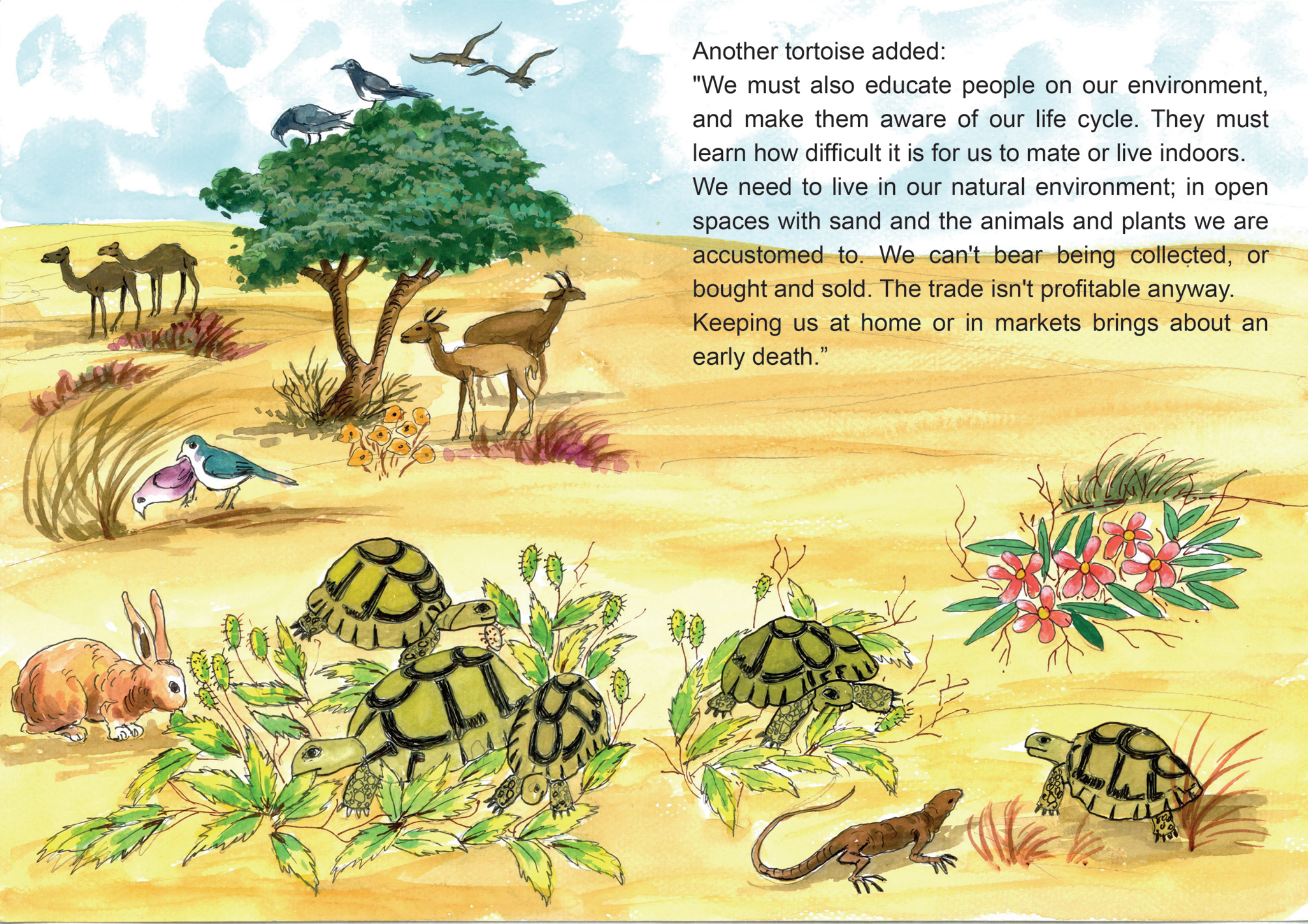
"The Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs established a group concerned with the protection of animals and plants. It was given the name 'Nature Conservation Sector' and was the first to take notice of the dangers threatening the animals and plants of the Mediterranean Coast. In 1981, they established what is called the 'Omayed Protectorate' in Matrouh, an area of 70000 km²."

Naany: "That was a great idea! What did the protectorate offer you?"

"As our species became rare, the protectorate managers set up a centre for protecting and breeding us, helping us to increase in number. An area of about 80 km² was prepared for us where we are protected and live freely. It is covered with smooth sand and filled with all the plants of the region."

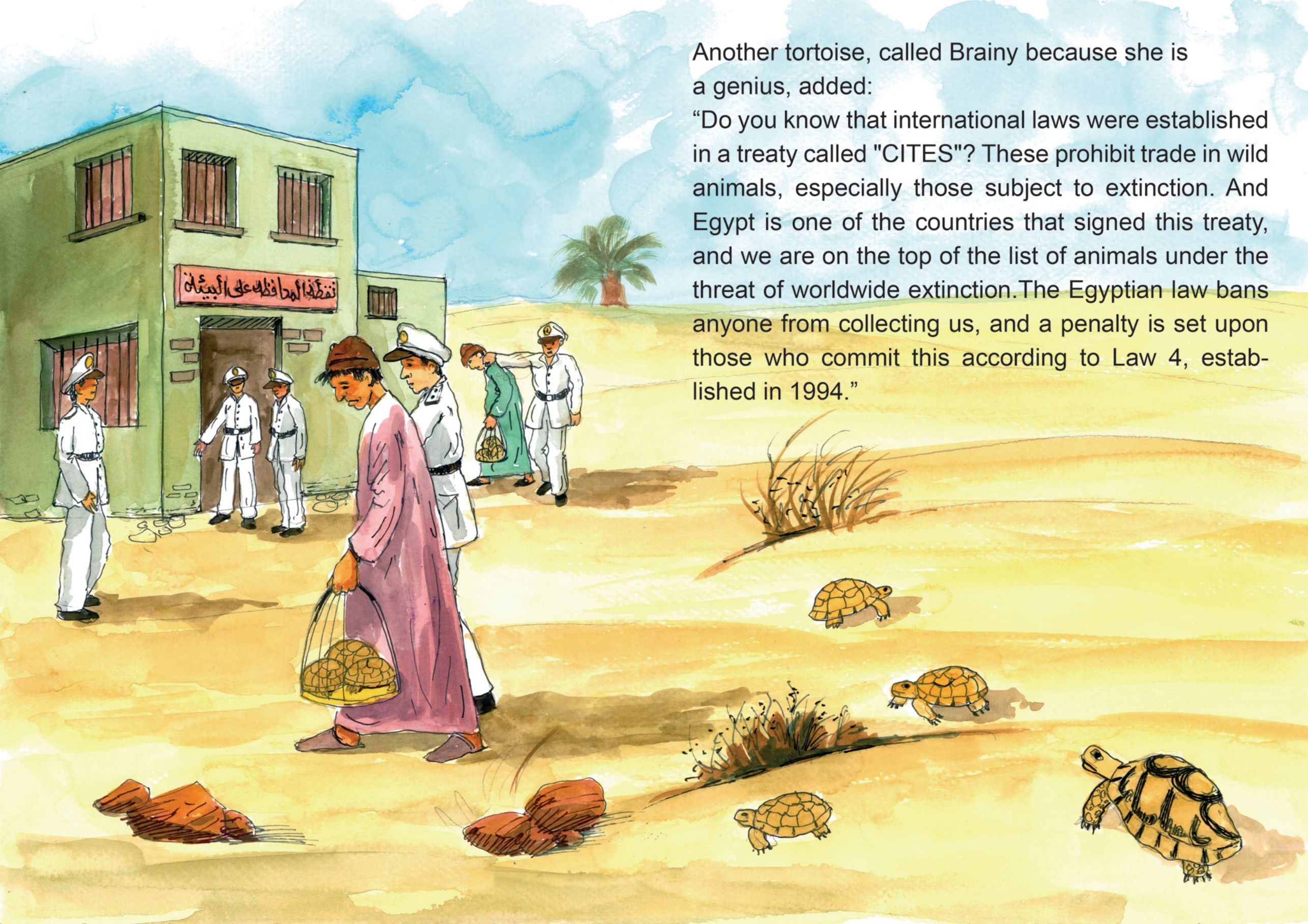
Another tortoise added:

"We must also educate people on our environment, and make them aware of our life cycle. They must learn how difficult it is for us to mate or live indoors. We need to live in our natural environment; in open spaces with sand and the animals and plants we are accustomed to. We can't bear being collected, or bought and sold. The trade isn't profitable anyway. Keeping us at home or in markets brings about an early death."



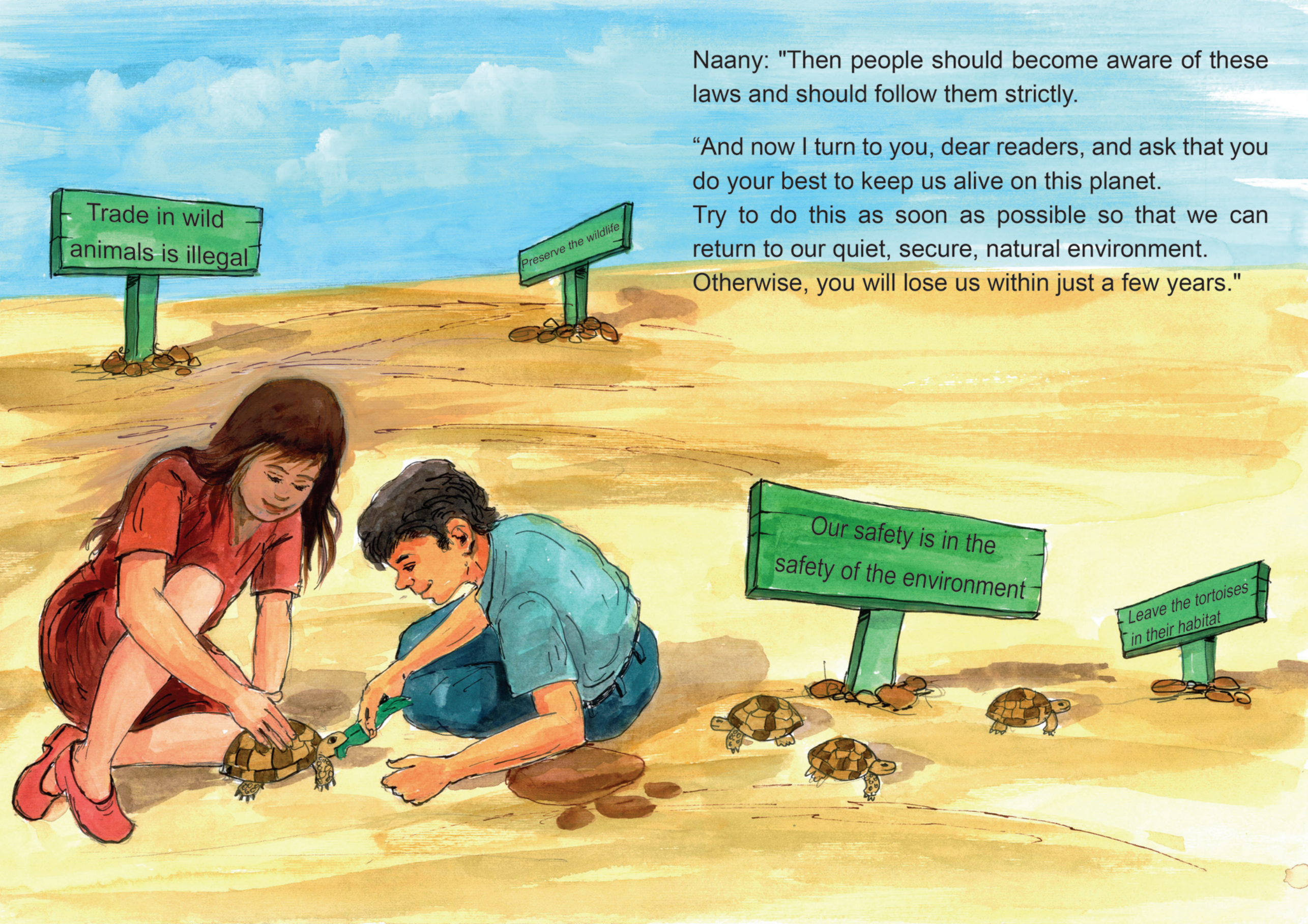
Another tortoise, called Brainy because she is a genius, added:

“Do you know that international laws were established in a treaty called "CITES"? These prohibit trade in wild animals, especially those subject to extinction. And Egypt is one of the countries that signed this treaty, and we are on the top of the list of animals under the threat of worldwide extinction. The Egyptian law bans anyone from collecting us, and a penalty is set upon those who commit this according to Law 4, established in 1994.”



Naany: "Then people should become aware of these laws and should follow them strictly.

"And now I turn to you, dear readers, and ask that you do your best to keep us alive on this planet. Try to do this as soon as possible so that we can return to our quiet, secure, natural environment. Otherwise, you will lose us within just a few years."



Extra information:

- ★ The Egyptian tortoise is one of the smallest tortoises living in the Northern Hemisphere.
- ★ A mature male reaches 8 to 10 cm long; females are a little longer at about 10 to 12 cm.
- ★ Because of being little, its body gets hot quickly. Its pale yellow colour lessens the amount of heat absorbed.
- ★ It only occurs in limited areas, in a narrow range of coastal arid desert in the south-eastern Mediterranean Basin in the north of Egypt
- ★ This tortoise lives in dry, sandy regions.
- ★ The average lifespan of a tortoise is 50 years.
- ★ It is very slow. It is active during the night and early morning, and hides in the sand later in the morning.
- ★ The Egyptian tortoise is a herbivore; it feeds on weeds, desert plants and fruits.
- ★ A tortoise becomes adult between the age of 14 and 20.
- ★ In early spring, when the weather is warmer, a female lays about 5 eggs in a shallow depression in the sand under a bush or in a burrow. Eggs hatch in the summer or early autumn.
- ★ The two main threats to tortoises are destruction of their habitat, and the illegal animal trade.
- ★ If we don't solve these problems, it may become extinct within the next 20 years.
- ★ The Egyptian tortoise is one of the world's most endangered tortoises. It is about to become extinct in Egypt.

Information about the Omayed Protected Area:

- ★ Omayed near Matrouh has been a Protected Area since 1986.
- ★ It is situated on the north western coast of Egypt, 83 km to the west of Alexandria, and 200 km east of Matrouh. It stretches for 30 km on the Mediterranean coast, covering an area of about 700 km².
- ★ It contains sand dunes, swamps and saline surfaces, flat shallow lands, rocky mountain bases, sandy surfaces and low fertile wadis.
- ★ 864 plant and animal species have been recorded here. Among them, 8 are at risk of extinction worldwide, while 7 of them occur only in Egypt.
- ★ The Protected Area aims to protect wildlife, increase local inhabitants' environmental awareness, and share the management of the Protectorate with them. This involves finding alternative sources of income and restoring damaged lands affected by grazing and cutting down of trees.
- ★ The total number of tortoises at the Protectorate at present is 320.
- ★ 108 tortoises have already been released into their natural habitat.
- ★ 200 are still receiving care at the Protectorate.
- ★ The Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs has established the first centre for protecting the Egyptian tortoise in the north of Sinai in Zaranik Protected Area, with the aim of protecting the species from collection for trade and other purposes. They started with 50 tortoises.



The problem:

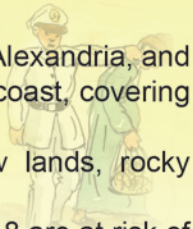
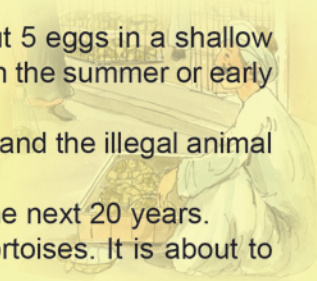
- ★ Trade in wild animals is the second most important reason behind the loss of tortoises, after damage to the environment.
- ★ Most captive tortoises are illegally sold in pet shops.
- ★ A huge number of animals die even before reaching the pet shops; the loss may reach 90%.
- ★ Due to export of large numbers of wild animals outside the country to the international market, some species are almost extinct. The CITES agreement banned trade in these animals.
- ★ In spite of this, some are still illegally circulating.
- ★ This led to the decline of its numbers in its natural habitat. Sadly, it dies quickly due to the lack of awareness of its owners on how to take care of it. In addition, they have difficulty reproducing while in captivity.

Consequently, we should not keep them as pets at home for the reasons mentioned. We must remember that the Egyptian tortoise is one of the world's most endangered species.

Trade in these tortoises (whether buying or selling) is against International and Egyptian law.

What can I do?

- 1- Discourage trade in this species. Don't buy any that are offered to you; the lower the demand, the fewer will be on offer.
- 2- In case you find it on sale, inform the Protectorate management situated in the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs, leaving the address and name of the locality selling it.
Contact the central management for Wild Life Protection.
Address: 30 Misr Helwan road, Al Maadi, EEAA building.
P.o.: 112728 Maadi.
Tel.: 025248792 - 025271391
- 3- If you own one, you should hand it to the Omayed Protected Area rangers in Matrouh.
There it will receive the best care, and it will be released back to its natural habitat.
Mobile.: 0129598882 Tel.: 046830701
Contact person: Mohamed Essawi.



QUESTIONS:

1. How was the Egyptian tortoise discovered?
2. How many kinds of tortoise are there? And what are they?
3. In what regions does the Egyptian tortoise occur?
4. Why does the Egyptian tortoise live near the seashore?
5. How does the Egyptian tortoise adapt to the surrounding environment?
6. What is the life cycle of the Egyptian tortoise?
7. Why is the Egyptian tortoise subject to extinction? And what dangers does it faces?
8. Is the trade in tortoises legal? Why? How does captivity affect them?
9. Why are tortoises kidnapped?
10. How are tortoises kidnapped? And how does this affect their lives?
11. Was the tortoises' environment affected by construction?
12. Why do the Bedouin collect tortoises?
13. How was the illegal trade counteracted?
14. What is the role of the Omayed Protected Area?
15. What does the tortoise need in order to live a healthy life?
16. Is there hope for propagating tortoises in their natural environment? How?

Sahlouf El Masry



" Also available: The clay animation of this story featuring new characters"

GAMES



Ahmed invented a code using animal and bird symbols.
try to decipher what Ahmed has written.
Use the table to guide you.

E	O	A	T	R	N	P	Y	I	G	S

The answer (up side -down) : EGYPTIAN TORTOISE

SHADE THE WORDS ,

TO FIND OUT THE SECRET WORD

PET - YELLOW - SAND - SUN - SHELL - TORTOISE
NATURE - TRADE - EGYPT - HOLE - WARM -
PROTECT - CITES - SEA - DESERT - DEW - MILD

K		P	W	C	S	U	N	S
M	L		E	A	I	S	E	A
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			Y	E	L	L	O	I

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The Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs, funded by
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Coming Soon
"The Egyptian Bufo"