



Featured Creature



L. Stemle

Gopher tortoise

Gopherus polyphemus



Animal Type
Vertebrate (reptile)



Habitat
Well-drained, sandy soils
(e.g. dunes, scrub)



Diet
Herbivores (grasses)



Range
Southeast USA
(Mississippi to southern
South Carolina & Florida)

Why are these tortoises important?

Gopher tortoises are **ecosystem engineers**. This means they create or modify their environments. These tortoises dig expansive burrows that shift the nearby soil and plants around. The holes also provide a home and food for many other animals. On top of it all, tortoises are important seed dispersers, meaning they move plant seeds and fruits far away from where they ate it.

Conservation

Gopher tortoises are federally listed as **threatened**. What are the main threats? Mainly habitat destruction and fragmentation due to urbanization and road building.

Researcher Spotlight



Leyna Stemle

PhD Student
University of Miami

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 @leynastem

What do I study?

I study the movement patterns and habitat preferences of young gopher tortoises and how we can use this to best protect the species.

What do I love about my work?

I find it so cool that even young tortoises can dig burrows that are often 10-20 feet in length. It is always surprising looking down into their deep burrows and then catching a tortoise the size of my hand!