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GALAPAGOS ISLANDS: LIZARDS THAT SWIM!

by Sherry Shahan

There are two dozen islands in the Galapagos Island chain, located off the coast of Ecuador. The islands lie on or near the Equator -- an invisible line that marks the center of the earth, halfway between the North and South Poles.

The Galapagos are home to the only sea-going lizards in the world. Imagine a 3 - 5 foot long lizard that dives into the ocean? And feeds on sea water plants? That's why these reptiles are called marine iguanas.

Marine iguanas might look clumsy walking on land. But their flat tail and spiky fins make them graceful swimmers. Long toes and sharp claws help them hold onto lava rocks while they eat. Otherwise strong currents could carry them too far from land.

These unusual reptiles can stay underwater up to an hour, though 5 or 10

Shahan/Marine Iguanas

minutes is more common. Their flat snout makes it easier to eat algae off the rocks. Sharp teeth make good scrapers. The water in this part of the Pacific Ocean is quite cold. So, after eating, these cold-blooded animals gather together on land for warmth. Large groups can be seen basking on rocky shores or in mangrove swamps. They tilt their faces up toward the sun. It's not unusual to see a lava lizard crawling over them!

Remember, reptiles don't sweat. Neither do marine iguanas. Once their bodies reach the perfect temperature, they lift themselves up on their front legs. This elevated stance allows breezes to fan them from underneath.

Scientists discovered that marine iguanas can shrink in size when food is scarce. Their bones actually become smaller. This makes marine iguanas the first known vertebrates (animals with a backbone) to reduce the size of their bones to fit a changing environment.

Since marine iguanas eat sea weeds they swallow a lot of salt water. How do they get rid of it? They have special glands near their nostrils. It might look like a marine iguana is spitting when it's really sneezing away salt. If you ever see a marine iguana with a white mustache, you'll know it's crusty salt!

THE END