

Henry is a Tuatara

By: C. Lee McKenzie

I'm Henry, and I'm here to set the record straight. I am a tuatara. I am not, I repeat, *NOT*, a lizard. I may resemble those guys, but I come from a different scientific order altogether. Let me write the order phonetically-- /spen-o-don-cha/ --spelled, Sphenodontia. There. Now I'm never to be confused with my cousins again, okay?

I'm unique because I'm one of only two species of the Sphenodontia left on this planet. Can you imagine? Probably not. I have a problem thinking that my ancestors were everywhere about 200 million years ago, and then who knows what happened? Scientists don't, but they love to dig around, answering questions about how I split off and went one way on the evolutionary path while those lizard went another. We were close once, then *whamo*, we weren't.

As a tuatara I'm a lovely greenish brown and can grow up to thirty-two inches long. See that beautiful spiny crest along my back? I'm very proud of that, and it's an eye-catcher for the ladies. I've already said I was unique and to add proof, take a look at the double row of bottom teeth fused to my jaw, not set in sockets. Nature very cleverly lets the ones on top fit between those rows on my lower jaw. I'd like to see a lizard who can show you something like that. Well, they can't.

Only Henry, the tuatara, can.

I keep scientists pretty busy. For example, they're still trying to figure out what my "third eye" does. Some think it has to do with helping me sense light and keep my balance between day and night regulated. Whatever it does, mine's working fine tucked under those protective scales on my skull, thank you. If you take a look at my picture, you'll see a very well-adjusted, happy tuatara.

One thing I resent a bit is being called a "living fossil." I've evolved nicely since the Mesozoic era (135 to 230 million years ago). Whew, just thinking about how long my family's been around makes my spines quiver. I've been around a while,



too. Ah, I remember when I first popped into this world. It was very different back then. I've seen a lot of changes over the centuries. Cars. Telephones. Airplanes. TVs. Computers. Cell phones. All of these inventions came after I was born.

Before me, around 1200-1300 AD something else came along too, something that almost made the tuatara extinct. It was the Pacific rat. The Polynesian settlers came to New Zealand and some of those pesky hitchhikers came along in their boats. They came hungry, hungry for tuatara. Fortunately, the New Zealanders spotted the problem and started getting rid of those rodents. They also started wildlife sanctuaries, so we're protected now. In fact, reports say the tuatara numbers are growing on some of the islands around here.

I managed to find a comfy place to live out my days in Invercargill, the southernmost city in New Zealand. Like other tuataras, I only like to eat twice a month, but when I do eat I get some tasty tidbits, beetles being my favorite snack. I'm treated with special care and tourists flock to admire me. Last year, at the age of 111, I became a daddy of eleven hatchlings. Overall, I'd say being a tuatara has been a great way to spend my very long life.

Now repeat after me, "Henry, the tuatara, is not a lizard."

Good job. 🤖