
IMPACT OF LAYING DATE AND FIRE ANTS ON HATCHLINGS OF *CHELONOIDIS PORTERI* ON SANTA CRUZ ISLAND, GALÁPAGOS, ECUADOR

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Abstract.—*Chelonoidis* land tortoises are iconic species endemic to the Galápagos Islands of Ecuador. Their populations have been dramatically reduced by human activities in the last three centuries, including indirect effects such as the introduction of invasive species. We investigated the mortality of eggs and hatchlings in 48 nests of *Chelonoidis porteri* on Santa Cruz Island with regard to various mortality causes such as the occurrence of fire ants and the date of laying. The average mortality rate was 0.56. Tropical Fire Ants (*Solenopsis geminata*) were present within 1 m of 75% of the *C. porteri* nests, and we encountered fire ants in 12.5% of excavated nests. We found no relationship between Tropical Fire Ant abundance and *C. porteri* egg and hatchling survivorship. We observed no signs of mold inside the nests. We determined that early deposition dates were associated with lower clutch survival and identified egg development as the critical life stage. Finally, we discuss the potential impacts of fire ants and climate change on tortoise survival and reproduction and stress the importance of taking these factors into account for the conservation of the endemic land tortoises of the Galápagos.

Key Words.—biodiversity; biological invasions; conservation efforts; land tortoises; *Solenopsis geminata*; Testudines

INTRODUCTION

Giant land tortoises of the genus *Chelonoidis* (formerly *Geochelone nigra*) are iconic species of the Galápagos Islands, Ecuador. They are native to the Galápagos and occur on all of the major islands, represented by 11 extant and five extinct species (Van Denburgh 1914; Poulakakis et al. 2012; Poulakakis et al. 2015; <http://www.reptile-database.org/>). Galápagos tortoises are important ecosystem engineers (Gibbs et al. 2010; Froyd et al. 2014), as they are the only native large-bodied herbivores on the archipelago and are also important seed dispersers (Blake et al. 2013b). However, over the last three centuries, Galápagos Tortoises have been harvested for their meat and oil (Townsend 1925; MacFarland et al. 1974a). Moreover, the introduction of alien mammalian species, which can serve as either predators or competitors (e.g., pigs, rats, cats, dogs, goats, and donkeys), has led to a further decline of many of the endemic *Chelonoidis* populations. Populations have declined from 100,000–250,000 individuals before human colonization in the 16th Century to fewer than 8,000–14,000 in the 1970s. During this period, two species of *Chelonoidis* went extinct (Townsend 1925; MacFarland et al. 1974a; Swingland and Klemens 1989; Jackson 1994). In 1965, Galápagos National Park launched a conservation program for giant

tortoises, which included captive breeding and rearing, repatriation, and protection of nesting areas (Perry 1970; Márquez et al. 1987; Cayot 2008), and non-native mammal control (Cruz et al. 2005; Carrion et al. 2007; Cruz et al. 2009; Rivera-Parra et al. 2012; Márquez et al. 2013). The program has been a success, with more than 4,049 tortoises belonging to eight populations from six islands repatriated by 2008 (Cayot 2008).

Invasive fire ants, Little Fire Ant (*Wasmannia auropunctata*) and Tropical Fire Ant (*Solenopsis geminata*), first recorded in the Galápagos Islands at the beginning of the 20th Century (Williams and Whelan 1991; Williams and Whelan 1992), can potentially threaten long-term survival of reptiles and birds (Roque-Albelo and Causton 1999; Roque-Albelo et al. 2000; Causton and Sevilla 2008). More specifically, observations were made of juvenile *Chelonoidis* tortoises stung by *S. geminata* (Williams and Whelan 1991), as well as depredated eggs and hatchlings inside nests (Snell et al. 2002; Tye et al. 2002; Cayot 2008; Blake et al. 2013b). *Solenopsis geminata* is a well-known tramp ant species and is considered one of the most damaging and widespread introduced ant species (Holway et al. 2002). In the Galápagos Islands, the species has been recorded in seven islands and 11 islets (Wauters et al. 2014) and belongs to a small group of invertebrates having a significant impact on Galápagos

wildlife, including reptiles, birds, and invertebrates (e.g., Causton et al. 2006; Herrera and Causton 2008; Wauters et al. 2016; Wauters et al. 2017).

Here, we present a preliminary study to assess survival of *Chelonoidis porteri* within the egg and immediately after hatching, when the young stay inside their burrows and are particularly vulnerable to predators. The incubation period of *C. porteri* extends between June to March and the incubation time lasts from 110–240 d, depending upon the temperature and the humidity in the nest. The egg-laying period occurs from June to December and the hatching period from December to March (Swingland and Klemens 1989; Blake et al. 2013a). The hatchlings may remain in the egg for a day or longer after pipping has occurred. After hatching, hatchlings stay inside the nests for several days (MacFarland et al. 1974b; Swingland and Klemens 1989). They are nourished by their yolk sac that protrudes from the lower shell, which provides the much-needed energy for the tortoises after they emerge from the burrow (Vitt and Caldwell 2013). The burrow allows hatchlings to stay underground, safely away from some predators, but the external yolk sac causes the tortoise to be relatively immobile, increasing its susceptibility to predation. In a protected nesting area on Santa Cruz Island, we estimated the proportion of damaged eggs and the mortality rate of hatchlings and investigated whether overall mortality of clutches was associated with the deposition date of eggs in the burrows and/or the presence of *S. geminata*.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our research was conducted in the protected nesting area of La Torta (Lat. -0.747637, Long. -90.341141), on Santa Cruz Island, Ecuador. La Torta is located in the arid zone, where the dominant plants are deciduous trees and shrubs such as *Bursera* spp. and cacti such as *Opuntia* spp. and *Jasminocereus* spp. Galápagos National Park wardens protected each new nest from mammalian predators using metallic mesh fixed by heavy rocks and visited the area weekly during the incubation period (i.e., from June to December). The meshing allows hatchlings to pass through and leave the nest cages. At the end of the hatching period in March, wardens excavated marked nests to facilitate the emergence of hatchlings from underground and surveyed the tortoises on the site.

We examined 48 tortoise nests sharing similar environmental conditions (i.e., sunshine, rainfall, temperature) between 3–28 March 2012. We excavated the tortoise nests and counted and released live tortoises; we then estimated the number of individuals that had already left the nest prior to the experiment by counting empty eggshells. We also counted damaged eggs (i.e.,

eggs with some cracks in the outer calcified shell, or eggs likely broken by the female tortoise when she covered up the hole), and dead hatchlings.

We considered the proportion of damaged eggs and the mortality of hatchlings separately, as potential threats during each period differ. We estimated the overall mortality of clutches as the proportion of dead tortoises at the excavation time. We conducted all fieldwork under the supervision of Galápagos National Park wardens.

We investigated the possible causes of mortality by looking for signs of the presence of fire ants and fungus growth inside the nests. To assess the fire ant abundance near the nests, we applied peanut butter (approximately 2 g) to a 10 × 10 cm piece of cardboard on the soil surface 1 m away from of each nest. All baits were set between 1100 and 1330 and after 1 h, we collected the baits and sealed them into a Ziploc® bag. We then killed, identified, and counted the ants. To estimate the ant activity around the nests, and identify other potentially damaging invertebrate species, we set up one pitfall trap (i.e., a plastic cup; diameter 6.5 cm, depth 10 cm) of water and detergent buried into the ground, at the same level as the ground surface next to 10 of the 48 nests and left them undisturbed for one week. We identified and counted the invertebrates captured in the traps. As Galápagos National Park wardens visited the area regularly during the incubation period, we used the protection date as a proxy of the deposition date of eggs in the burrows.

We used generalized linear models (GLMs) to assess whether mortality of tortoises was related to *S. geminata* abundance, deposition date of eggs, and/or clutch size. We used the Akaike information criterion (AIC) as an estimator of the relative quality of statistical models (Burnham and Anderson 2002), and performed model selection using the package AICcmodavg (Mazerolle 2016). We performed all statistical analyses using R (version 3.4.2, <https://www.r-project.org>) and RStudio (version 1.1).

RESULTS

The period of deposition of eggs greatly differed between nests and ranged from August to December (Table 1). We observed 126 damaged eggs and 115 hatchlings in 48 nests and deduced from remaining empty eggs that 73 tortoises had left the burrows prior to surveys (mean clutch size = $6.54 \pm [SD] 1.68$; range, 3–11). Nearly 40% of total laid eggs (126 of 314) were damaged and 22.3% of hatchlings (42 of 188) were dead at the time of our survey with the mean number of damaged eggs per nest = 2.63 ± 1.99 (range, 0–7) and the mean number of dead hatchlings per nest = 0.88 ± 1.25 (range, 0–4; Table 1). The mean proportion of

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TABLE 1. Composition of *Chelonoidis porteri* nests opening in La Torta, Santa Cruz Island, Galápagos. Displayed are the dates of the discovery of the nests and the dates of their excavation, the number of damaged eggs, the number of tortoises released by Galápagos National Park wardens, the number of tortoises that have left the nest before its excavation, the number of dead hatchlings, the clutch size and the abundance of Tropical Fire Ants at baits (baits were placed 1 m away from of each nest). An asterisk (*) in the ants abundance column indicates a mild infestation by fire ants inside the nests (< 100 workers); a double asterisk (**) indicates a heavy infestation (> 100 workers).

Nest	Protection date	Excavation date	Damaged eggs	Live hatchlings	Tortoises having left the nest	Dead hatchlings	Clutch size	Ants abundance
1_25	28 October 2011	6 March 2012	0	6	0	0	6	0
1_57	7 September 2011	6 March 2012	2	5	0	0	7	0
2_56	7 September 2011	6 March 2012	3	0	0	3	6	3
2_123	16 November 2011	6 March 2012	4	0	0	1	5	13
3_52	7 September 2011	6 March 2012	2	0	5	0	7	122
3_54	7 September 2011	6 March 2012	2	0	4	0	6	163
3_81	6 October 2011	6 March 2012	1	0	6	0	7	204
3_82	6 October 2011	6 March 2012	1	0	7	0	8	0
3_139	16 November 2011	6 March 2012	0	7	0	2	9	183
3_140	16 November 2011	6 March 2012	6	0	0	0	6	251
4_50	30 August 2011	6 March 2012	3	4	0	2	9	0
4_51	30 August 2011	6 March 2012	7	2	0	0	9	278
4_92	6 October 2011	6 March 2012	2	2	0	4	8	42
4_93	6 October 2011	6 March 2012	2	0	4	0	6	96
4_94	6 October 2011	6 March 2012	2	0	0	1	3	179
4_95	6 October 2011	6 March 2012	3	3	0	1	7	195
4_102	6 October 2011	6 March 2012	6	0	0	0	6	274
5_174	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	0	0	4	0	4	109*
5_177	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	1	0	3	0	4	229*
6_31	30 August 2011	14 March 2012	3	0	0	4	7	0**
6_176	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	6	5	0	0	11	0
6_178	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	0	0	6	0	6	431
7_170	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	0	0	5	1	6	96
7_171	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	1	5	0	0	6	96
7_173	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	7	0	0	0	7	1
8_32	30 August 2011	14 March 2012	4	0	0	2	6	127
9_179	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	2	5	0	0	7	112
9_180	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	1	6	0	0	7	116*
10_181	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	3	0	0	2	5	0**
10_182	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	1	0	4	0	5	112
10_183	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	1	6	0	2	9	0
10_184	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	1	0	0	3	4	0
11_161	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	3	2	0	0	5	256
11_162	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	3	2	0	0	5	256
11_164	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	5	0	0	2	7	202
11_165	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	2	0	0	3	5	202
12_73	6 October 2011	19 March 2012	4	0	0	2	6	289
12_75	6 October 2011	19 March 2012	5	0	0	0	5	141

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED). Composition of *Chelonoidis porteri* nests opening in La Torta, Santa Cruz Island, Galápagos. Displayed are the dates of the discovery of the nests and the dates of their excavation, the number of damaged eggs, the number of tortoises released by Galápagos National Park wardens, the number of tortoises that have left the nest before its excavation, the number of dead hatchlings, the clutch size and the abundance of Tropical Fire Ants at baits (baits were placed 1 m away from of each nest). An asterisk (*) in the ants abundance column indicates a mild infestation by fire ants inside the nests (< 100 workers); a double asterisk (**) indicates a heavy infestation (> 100 workers).

Nest	Protection date	Excavation date	Damaged eggs	Live hatchlings	Tortoises having left the nest	Dead hatchlings	Clutch size	Ants abundance
12_76	6 October 2011	19 March 2012	3	1	0	3	7	288
12_78	6 October 2011	19 March 2012	3	6	0	0	9	249
13_167	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	5	0	5	0	10	0
13_169	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	0	0	7	0	7	0
14_79	6 October 2011	19 March 2012	4	0	0	1	5	29
14_80	6 October 2011	28 March 2012	5	0	0	0	5	29
16_172	27 December 2011	14 March 2012	4	0	0	3	7	272**
17_159	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	3	6	0	0	9	135
18_166	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	0	0	6	0	6	57
18_168	27 December 2011	28 March 2012	0	0	7	0	7	361

damaged eggs per nest and dead hatchlings per nest were 0.41 ± 0.31 (range, 0–1) and 0.34 ± 0.45 (range, 0–1), respectively. The overall mortality rate (from laying to hatchlings) per nest was 0.56 ± 0.39 (range, 0–1; Table 1).

We observed no sign of fungal infections. However, *S. geminata* was present within 1 m of 75% of nests (36 of 48). Worker ants of this species generally forage within 15 m of their nest (Levins et al. 1973; Perfecto 1994), and foraging may occur underground (Chang and Ota 1976). Around the baits, field experiments revealed that *S. geminata* was the only ant species present after one hour. *Solenopsis geminata* ants recruit rapidly, numerically dominate, and aggressively exclude from baits other ant species (Wauters et al. 2014).

The abundance of *S. geminata* varied from 0 to 341 individuals (mean = 129.12 ± 115.27 ; median = 114) per baited site. Worker ants of *S. geminata* were present inside six nests, three of which were mildly infested (i.e., presence of a few ants only), and three were heavily infested (i.e., hundreds of ants). In the three heavily infested nests, we found dead hatchlings (two to four individuals per nest) and three to four damaged eggs. Some dead tortoises presented injuries consistent with *S. geminata* attacks such as damaged gnawed skin.

We collected *S. geminata* in all 10 pitfall traps [mean individuals per trap = 49.00 ± 43.20 (range, 5–124)]. We also identified four other ant species, constituting only 28 (5.41%) of 518 individuals collected: *Brachymyrmex heeri* (15 individuals in four traps), *Camponotus zonatus* (seven individuals in three traps), *Odontomachus bauri* (three individuals in three traps) and *Nylanderia steinheili* (three individuals in three traps). These four ant species, although introduced, do not *a priori* constitute a threat to the tortoises, as they have never been observed attacking vertebrates in the Galápagos

Islands, nor, to our knowledge, elsewhere (unpubl. data). Except for a small number of dipterans, we did not find any other invertebrates in pitfall traps.

Overall mortality rate of tortoises (from laying to hatchlings) was best explained by a model including the date of deposition, the clutch size, and the interaction between these two factors (lowest AIC value and an Akaike's weight of 0.91; Table 2). Ant presence inside the burrows did not influence overall mortality rate (Table 2). Overall mortality rate was significantly negatively associated both with the earliest dates of deposition (estimated model coefficient = -0.04 , $P < 0.001$) and with the total number of laid eggs (estimated model coefficient = -68.79 , $P < 0.001$; Table 3). More specifically, the deposition date and the total number of laid eggs significantly affected the pre-hatching mortality (i.e., impacts eggs; deposition date: estimated model coefficients = -0.010 , $P = 0.018$; clutch size: estimated model coefficients = -0.181 , $P = 0.047$) but not the post-hatching mortality (i.e., mortality of hatchlings; all $P > 0.079$; Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Tortoise mortality.—We estimated mortality rate of eggs for *C. porteri* in La Torta, Santa Cruz Island to be 55.6%. We found a negative association between the early date of egg laying and the number of damaged eggs. The time spent in the burrows is directly linked with temperature (Swingland and Klemens 1989; Deeming and Ferguson 2004). Clutches laid early in the cool season will experience cooler temperatures and need longer incubation periods, while eggs laid late in the season will experience warmer temperatures and require a shorter incubation period, consistent with the degree-day model (MacFarland et al. 1974b; Deeming

TABLE 2. Results of generalized linear model selection showing Akaike information criterion (AIC), the delta AIC to the most likely model (Delta *i*), the Akaike weights (AIC Wt), the cumulative Akaike weights (Cum.Wt) and the log-likelihood (LL) of each model. Abbreviations are AA = ants abundance, D1 = date of the discovery of the nests (a proxy of the deposition date of eggs in the burrows), and CS = clutch size.

Models	AIC	Delta <i>i</i>	AIC Wt	Cum.Wt	LL
Mortality of tortoises = D1 * CS	260.17	0	0.91	0.91	-126.09
Mortality of tortoises = D1 + CS	265.55	5.38	0.06	0.97	-129.78
Mortality of tortoises = AA + D1 + CS	267.46	7.29	0.02	0.99	-129.73
Mortality of tortoises = D1	270.69	10.52	0	1	-133.35
Mortality of tortoises = AA * D1	272.58	12.41	0	1	-132.29
Mortality of tortoises = AA + D1	272.67	12.49	0	1	-133.33
Mortality of tortoises = CS	276.10	15.93	0	1	-136.05
Mortality of tortoises = AA + CS	277.97	17.79	0	1	-135.98
Mortality of tortoises = AA * CS	279.77	19.60	0	1	-135.89
Mortality of tortoises = AA	282.75	22.57	0	1	-139.37

and Ferguson 2004; Du et al. 2009). Usually, cool temperatures coupled with long incubation times are associated with greater survival and greater body size in hatchlings because the cooler temperatures prevent the eggs from desiccating and overheating (Van Damme et al. 1992, Vitt and Caldwell 2013). However, long incubation times can also be deleterious because the eggs are more vulnerable to other causes of mortality, such as predators, flooding, and fungal infections (Vitt and Caldwell 2013). As we did not observe fungal infections, and because our nests were protected against mammalian predation, egg loss in this study could be caused by excessive humidity (Van Damme et al. 1992; Deeming and Ferguson 2004). Although a certain amount of humidity is necessary for the embryos during the early incubation stages to protect them from drying out, the drying of embryos is necessary at a later stage

of development to initiate air breathing (Deeming and Ferguson 2004). The nesting area was generally arid but water puddles were common due the clay content of the soil, potentially temporarily flooding some of the tortoise nests.

Another factor potentially influencing the mortality of tortoises could be linked to climate change. Bell et al. (2013) show that global warming in the tropics can reduce hatchling viability and performances of ectothermic oviparous reptiles. Measurements of sea surface temperature, air temperature, and rainfall since 1965 (<http://www.darwinfoundation.org/datazone/climate/>) show no recent warming in the Galápagos Islands (Trueman and d'Ozouville 2010; Wolff 2010). However, climate models predict longer and more common El Niño and La Niña events with increased rainfall (Grant and Grant 1992; Snell et al. 2002; Sachs and Ladd 2010). Because extreme temperatures are more informative of the thermal environment than average temperatures (Camacho et al. 2015), this increase of extreme climatic events can also have detrimental effects on tortoises eggs and hatchlings survival (Santidrián Tomillo et al. 2012). The last two strong El Niño events in 1982–83 and 1997–98 caused: (1) high mortality of *Chelonoidis* tortoises falling down in ravines; (2) drowning in floods; and/or (3) decreased their reproductive output (Snell et al. 2002). The nests were rendered unviable because increased vegetation and wet soils reduced incubation temperatures, favored mold, and impeded gas exchange (Márquez et al. 2008; Larrea and Di Carlo 2011). These events also seemed to favor fire ants, which attacked and killed more hatchlings during the El Niño years (Trueman and d'Ozouville 2010).

MacFarland et al. (1974 a,b) observed hatching rates of *C. porteri* in 1969–1970, 1970–1971, and 1971–1972 of 84.6%, 73.2%, and 75.6%, respectively. They did not mention the name of their study site on Santa Cruz, nor if they used cages to protect nests against mammalian

TABLE 3. Generalized linear model coefficients of the most likely model of mortality of tortoises (= D1×CS). Abbreviations are as in Table 2. Given are the estimated model coefficients (coef.), their standard error (SE) and the *P*-value. A negative model coefficient indicates a negative relationship.

	Coef.	SE	<i>P</i> -value
Overall mortality rate			
D1	-0.041	0.012	0.001
CS	-68.794	25.713	0.007
D1×CS	0.004	0.002	0.008
Pre-hatching mortality			
D1	-0.010	0.004	0.018
CS	-18.130	8.839	0.0463
D1×CS	0.001	0.001	0.0467
Post-hatching mortality			
D1	-0.011	0.006	0.0789
CS	-19.150	13.030	0.1499
D1×CS	0.001	0.001	0.1517

predators. Given that a slight change in microhabitat can influence the incubation temperature and the mortality rate of eggs (Deeming and Ferguson 2004), the difference with our results could be explained by a difference in habitat type and/or methodology.

Influence of predation.—A recent study was conducted at a different site on Santa Cruz Island (El Chato) in a more humid area (Blake et al. 2013a). In this study, despite the mesh and rocks around the nests, feral pigs preyed upon 57% of nests of the protected area, and trampling and/or predation by donkeys, pigs, and *S. geminata* destroyed an additional 14% of nests. During our survey, we did not observe pigs or donkeys on our study site, which is separated by < 14 km from the El Chato study site. The harsh habitat conditions of La Torta (hot weather, rocky soil, vegetation composed of sclerophyllic plants and cacti) compared with the more humid site of El Chato, combined with the remoteness of La Torta, prevents pigs and donkeys from colonizing the area. Other vertebrates such as rats or cats might also be present in La Torta, but the meshes and heavy rocks did not show signs of deterioration and may be sufficient to keep these predators from destroying nests.

Fire ants are abundant on La Torta, and readily attack vertebrate intruders, including humans (Wheeler 1910; pers. obs.). Although we found no relationship between *S. geminata* abundance and tortoise mortality, the presence of fire ants inside some of the nests and the feeding on dead individuals confirm that *S. geminata* are able to enter nests and potentially cause damage to hatchlings. We were not able, however, to determine whether *S. geminata* found inside nests caused the death of hatchlings or were only scavenging on their bodies. Márquez et al. (2004) suggested that *S. geminata* workers might perforate *Chelonoidis* eggs and feed on the embryos. It is unlikely that *S. geminata* were able to enter the intact eggs, given the hard and thick shell of *Chelonoidis* eggs (Swingland and Klemens 1989), but fire ants could attack cracked eggs or hatchlings right after breaking the shell, when they are the most vulnerable. Others have observed fire ants preying upon cracked eggs and hatchlings (Snell et al. 2002; Blake et al. 2013a; Galápagos National Park wardens, pers. comm.), and attacking the skin of juvenile and adult tortoises (Williams and Whelan 1991; Márquez et al. 2004).

Another species of fire ant closely related to *S. geminata* is the Red Imported Fire Ant (*S. invicta*), which is capable of penetrating the eggs of several reptile species including the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*; Diffie et al. 2010). However, *S. invicta* workers are not able to penetrate intact eggshells of the Florida Red-bellied Turtle, *Pseudomys nelsoni* (Allen et al. 2004), or of the Common Snapping Turtle, *Chelydra serpentina* (Connors 1998); (Diffie et al. 2010).

Similarly, *S. invicta* workers could not penetrate Florida Softshell (*Apalone ferox*) or Musk Turtle (*Sternotherus odoratus*) eggs (Diffie et al. 2010), two species that have hard thick shelled eggs, similar to those of *Chelonoidis*.

The apparent contradiction between the previously observed impacts of *S. geminata* and the results of our study may be explained by the use of baits to estimate ant abundances. Although widely used (Gotelli et al. 2011), these baits may present biases when estimating ant abundance. Even if workers of *S. geminata* are active 24 h a day (Wauters et al. 2014), with a relative constant number of individuals, we cannot exclude that the abundance of ants may have been different at another time than that of our observations. Moreover, as all baiting experiments were conducted mid-day, it is possible that the heat had a negative impact on ant activity on the surface, and that ants were mostly confined to underground trails instead. For example, on two occasions, we observed *S. geminata* inside tortoise nests but found no ants at the bait stations. A differential exposure of the baits to the sun among traps may not reflect actual abundance of ants locally. The discrepancy could also be explained by a saturation of the site by *S. geminata*. *Solenopsis geminata* are so abundant that all nests go through the same stress caused by these ants and no correlation can be found between ant abundance and mortality. Finally, the loss of evidence of *S. geminata* predation (or other causes of mortality) may stem for the fact that the nests were not evaluated shortly after individuals hatched for all nests. Indeed, to avoid any repetitive and unnecessary disturbances, Galápagos National Park wardens recommended that we waited until March before excavating nests, but some tortoises could have hatched and been predated inside the nests earlier in the season.

Perspectives and recommendations.—To protect this iconic *Chelonoidis* species, we recommend close monitoring of La Torta. *Solenopsis geminata* are widespread on the archipelago and have been spreading in recent decades (Wauters et al. 2014; Wauters et al. 2016), including to tortoise nesting areas (Márquez et al. 2004; Márquez et al. 2008). As they have been reported attacking *Chelonoidis* tortoises on several occasions, we recommend close monitoring of *S. geminata* populations. For example, ant baits could be used at dusk or dawn to prevent heat interfering with ant activity. Moreover, we also recommend monitoring areas at different times during the incubation period, with and without nests to see if ants show spatial correlation to active nests. To precisely determine if the *S. geminata* impact the giant tortoise *C. porteri*, it could be useful to conduct a similar experiment by comparing the mortality of tortoises within a same population in zones infested by *S. geminata* and in areas without *S. geminata*. We also recommend documenting the presence of *S. geminata*

inside turtle nests or their predation on hatchlings when excavating the nests. Fire ant eradications using insecticides that have minimal impacts on vertebrates could be used as a preventative measure on *Chelonoidis* nesting sites (Abedrabbo 1994; Causton et al. 2012). Finally, as climate change has been shown to have negative impacts on *Chelonoidis* tortoise survival and reproduction, weather data and nest temperatures should be included in future tortoises survival studies.

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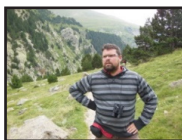
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