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## **To cite this version:**

Beth Reinke, Hugo Cayuela, Fredric J. Janzen, Jean-François Lemaître, Jean-Michel Gaillard, et al.. Diverse aging rates in ectothermic tetrapods provide insights for the evolution of aging and longevity. Science, 2022, 376 (6600), pp.1459-1466. 10.1126/science.abm0151 . hal-03703901

# **HAL Id: hal-03703901 <https://cnrs.hal.science/hal-03703901v1>**

Submitted on 14 Nov 2023

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# **Title:** Diverse aging rates in ectothermic tetrapods provide insights for the evolution of aging and longevity

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#### **Abstract:**

 Comparative studies of mortality in the wild are necessary to understand the evolution of aging, yet ectothermic tetrapods are under-represented in this comparative landscape despite their suitability for testing evolutionary hypotheses. We present a study of aging rates and longevity across wild tetrapod ectotherms, utilizing data from 107 populations (77 species) of reptiles and amphibians. We test hypotheses of how thermoregulatory mode, temperature, protective phenotypes, and pace of life-history contribute to aging. Controlling for phylogeny and body size, ectotherms display a higher diversity of aging rates than endotherms, and include phylogenetically-widespread evidence of negligible aging. Protective phenotypes and life-history strategies further explain macroevolutionary patterns of aging. By adding ectothermic tetrapods, our comparative analyses enhance our understanding of the evolution of aging. **One-Sentence Summary:** Aging rates are highly variable among ectothermic tetrapods in the wild, ranging from negligible aging to fast aging rates, and aging rates decrease in species with protective phenotypes (e.g., armor, venom) and slow-paced life histories. **Main Text:** Comparative studies of animal aging rates in the wild are critical for assessing the potential limits of longevity and understanding ecological and evolutionary factors shaping variation in aging strategies (*1*–*3*). Demographic indicators of aging include adult longevity and whether, and at what rate, age-specific mortality accelerates with advancing adult age. Previous comparative studies have provided important insights regarding the evolution of demographic aging in the endothermic tetrapods (birds and mammals; e.g., *2*–*6*). However, ectotherms hold most of the records for animal longevity, and comprise 26 of the 30 known records for vertebrate species with maximum longevity estimated to be over 100 years (*8*–*11*) (tetrapod examples include Galapagos tortoises, eastern box turtles, European pond turtles, and *Proteus*

 salamanders). Additionally, some ectothermic tetrapods may exhibit low or even negligible (sensu *12*) mortality and reproductive aging (*1*, *13*–*18*). Understanding whether, and how, natural selection has shaped mortality trajectories and longevity requires phylogenetically-controlled tests to determine whether these species-specific results are anomalies that evolved in specific lineages of ectotherms, or if they are common and repeated evolutionary outcomes. Recent advances in contrasting endotherm and ectotherm longevity have contributed to a phylogenetic perspective on lifespan (*10*, *11*), but often use maximum longevity as their metric, which is not based on the age-specific mortality trajectory and is strongly influenced by sample size, so can lead to inaccurate conclusions (*19*, *20*). Additionally, the lack of comparative analyses of aging rates in ectothermic tetrapods is a major gap in our knowledge(*21*). A comprehensive analysis of aging across ectothermic tetrapods requires decades of field-based population-level research, international collaborations, and powerful quantitative tools. Integrating these efforts across studies and taxa allows for using data from ectotherms to test evolutionary hypotheses of aging (*21*), and for a phylogenetic understanding of the evolution of aging across tetrapods. The evolutionary genetics of aging result from age-specific mutation-selection balance trajectories where mutations have age-specific effects that may be strictly deleterious in later adult stages or ages, and/or beneficial earlier (i.e., antagonistically pleiotropic, *22*). Hypotheses for how natural selection and the environment interact to shape this balance were first formulated by Medawar (*23*), and further developed by Hamilton (*24*) and others (*25*–*27*). In ectotherms, body temperature varies with the environment and, because metabolism responds to temperature, ectothermic metabolism and cellular processes downregulate in cold temperatures, allowing for extended periods of brumation and aestivation. In addition, after controlling for body size, ectotherms have lower resting metabolic rates than endotherms (*28*). Accordingly, the



 Aging and longevity may co-evolve through direct or indirect selection on life-history traits that are genetically correlated (*3*). Under antagonistic pleiotropy, genes that confer higher fitness in early life relative to late life will increase in frequency in populations that are skewed toward younger age classes (*24*). Because many ectothermic tetrapods have indeterminate growth and fecundity (*41*, *42*), life-history theory predicts that such species should have stronger selection against deleterious late-age mutations relative to species with determinate growth and fecundity (*21*). Indeed, any species in which individuals from older age classes contribute more to population growth (e.g., fecundity, behavior) relative to other species should have concomitant slower aging. Thus, the aging rate may evolve from genetic covariation among life-history traits, such as annual fecundity, age of first reproduction, and annual survival. This results in a slow- fast continuum of life histories (*43*–*46*) that should match slow vs. fast aging rates (the Slow-Fast Continuum Hypothesis). For example, fast aging, expected to be correlated with a short reproductive lifespan, should evolve in a correlated manner with fast pace of life, and vice versa (*43*, *47*). Therefore, the existence of a strong positive covariation among life-history traits (e.g., *48*) predicts that the aging rate should covary with age of first reproduction (negatively) and with annual fecundity (positively) such that species that mature relatively early or that allocate 86 relatively more energy to reproduction early in life display faster aging and shorter longevities (*45*, *49*, *50*).

 We applied comparative phylogenetic methods to tetrapod mark-recapture data to analyze variation within ectotherm demographic aging and longevity in the wild, to compare aging and longevity to endotherms, and to address the following four distinct but not mutually- exclusive hypotheses: i) Thermoregulatory Mode, ii) Temperature, iii) Protective Phenotypes, and iv) Slow-Fast Continuum. We analyzed long-term capture-recapture data collected in the

 wild from 107 populations of 77 species, with study length averaging 17 years (ranging from 4 to 60 years), to assess macroevolutionary patterns of aging rate and longevity in free-living amphibians and non-avian reptiles. We present the first comprehensive comparative analysis of patterns of aging across these ectotherms and estimate both the rate of aging (computed as the slope of the relative rate of increasing age-specific mortality derived from the Gompertz model- $\beta_1$ ) and longevity (computed as the number of years after the age of first reproduction until 95% of adults in a given cohort have died, as opposed to the age of the longest-lived individual). Specifically, we test: i) whether ectotherms consistently age more slowly and live longer than endotherms, ii) whether annual mean, minimum, or maximum environmental temperature experienced by a population covaries with rate of aging and longevity, iii) whether species with protective phenotypes (either physical or chemical) age slower and live longer than those without physical or chemical protections, and iv) whether the rate of aging and longevity strongly covary with other biological traits such as age at first reproduction and annual fecundity.

#### **Aging in ectothermic tetrapods**

 All orders represented by the 77 reptile and amphibian species for which age-specific 108 estimates of mortality could be estimated had at least one species with negligible aging ( $\beta_1 \sim 0$ ; 109 Fig 1, Data S1). Notably, turtles had slow rates of aging (mean  $\beta_1 \pm SE = 0.04 \pm 0.01$ ), with a 110 narrow range relative to the number of species represented  $(-0.013 - 0.225)$  for 14 species; Fig 2, Table S1). When corrected for body size and phylogeny (Table S2), crocodilians, tuatara, and 112 salamanders were similarly slow in aging (crocodilians: mean  $\beta_1 = 0.14 \pm 0.06$ , tuatara: 0.005, 113 and salamanders:  $0.18 \pm 0.05$ ) in comparison to squamates (mean  $\beta_1 = 0.55 \pm 0.14$ ) and frogs 114 (mean  $\beta_1 \pm \text{SE} = 0.41 \pm 0.06$ ; Fig 2, Data S1). Turtles and tuatara exhibited greater longevity 115 (95% of adult lifespan) than most other ectothermic tetrapods, with mean longevities of 39  $(\pm$  SE 116 6) and 137 years, respectively, compared to crocodilians (21 years  $\pm$  5), squamates (12 years  $\pm$ 

117 2), frogs (8 years  $\pm$  0.6), and salamanders (10 years  $\pm$  1; Table S1-S2, Data S1), again when

corrected for the potential confounding effects of body size and phylogeny.

#### **Thermoregulatory Mode Hypothesis**

 Controlling for phylogeny and body size, across tetrapods, aging rate and longevity did not differ between ectotherms and endotherms (Table 1, Fig 3, see Fig S1 for raw values by

122 class). Ectotherms ranged well above and below the known aging rates for endotherms ( $C_v= 1.40$ )

123 for ectotherms and 1.15 for endotherms), and had the greatest longevities ( $C_v=0.37$  for

ectotherms and 0.32 for endotherms; Fig S1). The aging patterns of ectotherms were thus more

diverse, rather than slower than those reported in endotherms. Indeed, the ectotherm variance in

126 aging rate was significantly greater than the endotherm variance  $(F_{106/118} = 5.49, p = 0.001)$ ,

127 although the variance in longevities was not statistically different  $(F_{106/118} = 1.31, p=0.16)$ . As

expected, there was a negative relationship between aging rate and longevity in both groups, with

faster aging rates corresponding to shorter longevity, but the slope of the relationship was more

steeply negative in ectotherms than in endotherms (Table 1, Fig 3C). The negative association

between rate of aging and longevity varied considerably among mammals, birds, reptiles, and

amphibians, when considered by taxonomic class (Fig S2; Table S3).

**Temperature Hypothesis** 

 Within ectotherms, the rate of aging increased with mean temperature in reptiles, but decreased with mean temperature in amphibians (Table 2, Fig S3). Models using minimum and maximum temperatures instead of mean showed the same patterns (Table S4).

**Protective Phenotypes Hypothesis**

 We considered three categories of protection: physical (armor and shells), chemical (venom and skin toxins), and neither physical nor chemical (Fig S4). Within ectothermic

tetrapods, species with physical or chemical protection aged slower than species with neither

141 physical nor chemical protection (mean  $\beta_1 \pm SE$ ; physical:  $0.05 \pm 0.01$ , chemical:  $0.29 \pm 0.06$ ,

142 neither:  $0.47 \pm 0.07$ ). Species with physical protection lived longer than those with no protection

143 and those with chemical protection (mean years  $\pm$  SD; physical:  $36 \pm 5$ , neither:  $10 \pm 3$ ,

144 chemical: $11 \pm 1$ , Table S5, Data S1).

#### **Slow-fast Continuum Hypothesis**

 We examined relationships between both the age of first reproduction and annual fecundity and rate of aging and longevity. As expected under the slow-fast continuum hypothesis, the rate of aging was negatively associated with the log age of first reproduction, and positively associated with the log annual fecundity (Table 2). However, because class (i.e., reptile or amphibian) influenced these relationships, we further investigated these associations within class. This analysis revealed a class-dependent structure of the slow-fast continuum results. A decreasing rate of aging with increasing age of first reproduction structured the life history variation in reptiles, whereas an increasing rate of aging with increasing annual fecundity structured the life history variation in amphibians (Table S6, Fig 4A-4B). In both amphibians and reptiles, longevity was positively associated with the age of first reproduction, as expected under the slow-fast continuum hypothesis (Table 2, Fig. 4C). However, longevity was not related to annual fecundity in either class (Table S6, Fig 4D). Importantly, all of these results were still true when we restricted the analyses to the best quality datasets (i.e., >25% of known-age individuals monitored and study length equal to or longer than the median longevity), demonstrating that variable data quality among populations has no detectable influence (Table S8).

**Discussion**

 We found greater variation in aging rates and longevities across wild ectothermic tetrapods than in birds and mammals. Our study thus demonstrates that the parameter space for 164 aging rates and longevities is much larger in ectotherms than previously thought. Turtles, crocodilians, and salamanders have remarkably low aging rates and extended longevities for their size. Most turtles have physical protection (bony shells), as well as a relatively slow pace of life, which both contribute to the negligible aging and exceptional longevity. Future work that focuses on turtles with soft shells (versus rigid, as in this study) may help disentangle causes of slow turtle aging. While turtle aging rates are low overall, they are surprisingly variable. For example, in *Chrysemys picta*, age at maturity, longevity, and aging rates vary significantly among populations (8, 11, 12, this study). Our analyses thus provide clear evidence that ectotherms have a remarkable diversity of aging rates and longevities and add to the growing literature on ectotherm longevity (e.g., *10*, *11*). Within ectotherms, rates of aging ranged from - 0.013 to 2.0, corresponding to a continuum from negligible aging to fast aging. Ectotherm longevity (measured here as the age when 95% of adults have died) ranged from 1 year to 137 176 years. For comparison, primate aging rates are between  $0.04 - 0.50$  (longevity:  $4 - 84$  years), with a human aging rate of about 0.1(longevity:100 years; *2*). The overall mammalian rates of aging ranged from 0.03 to 1.2, with a single high value observed in eastern moles (*Scalopus aquaticus*) representing an outlier (Fig S1). Although negligible aging was not observed in the mammals included in our sample, it has been identified in naked mole-rats (*51*). One notable group of vertebrates missing from our comparisons is fishes, which themselves have highly variable aging rates and longevities and contain species of great interest to aging biology (e.g., rock fish, bigmouth buffalo, and short-lived poeciliids) (*52*–*55*).



 for the proximate effect of temperature on aging (e.g., *58*), and are necessary to tease apart how temperature might influence the evolution of aging. Whether and how global warming will impact the evolution of aging rates remains unknown, but will become especially important to understand for making management and conservation decisions to avoid species extinctions. Our analyses also support the Protective Phenotypes Hypothesis within ectothermic tetrapods. Species with physically protective phenotypes, such as armor, spines, or shells, aged more slowly and lived much longer for their size than those without protective phenotypes (Table S5). Though species with chemical protection have greater maximum longevities than those without (*38*, *59*), we provide here the first evidence that metrics describing the adult mortality trajectory are linked to these protective phenotypes. This result may explain uniquely slow rates of aging in turtles, coupled with extended longevities. Salamanders also aged slowly relative to other tetrapod ectotherms. We were unable to include behaviors such as fossorial lifestyles or seasonal activity, that may function as behavioral protections by reducing predation risk, with a consequence of low mortality rates (*3,* though see *11* which found that microhabitat preference, including fossorial behavior, did not influence maximum longevity). Moreover, many salamanders have regenerative capabilities that could contribute to slowing aging through greater damage repair efficiency (*15*, *60*, *61*).

 Lastly, we document that the slow-fast continuum of life histories is strongly involved in shaping aging. Both rates of aging and longevities were associated with other biological traits (e.g., age at first reproduction and annual fecundity) in reptiles and amphibians. Earlier age at first reproduction in reptiles was correlated with faster aging rates (Table 2, Fig 4). A similar pattern has been documented in birds and mammals, where an earlier age at first reproduction corresponded to an earlier age at the onset of senescence (*62*, *63*). Amphibian species with

 higher annual fecundities, and therefore greater annual reproductive allocation, had faster rates of aging, which has also been found in birds and mammals, and supports Hamilton's original prediction (*24*). Earlier age of first reproduction was also associated with shorter longevity in both amphibians and reptiles (Fig 4). Heralded as a key component of the life-history portfolio (*64*, *65*), this positive relationship between age at first reproduction and adult longevity is thus robust across tetrapod ectotherms as well. These results are congruent with patterns detected in endothermic vertebrates (*4*) and fit into an existing evolutionary framework of genetic correlations underlying relationships among life-history traits, including aging and longevity. Further work on the quantitative genetic and genomic bases of aging and longevity are necessary to test broadly whether the phenotypic associations are underlain by genetic correlations.

 The evolution of aging rates and longevity has seemingly multiple determinants from the genetic architecture of life-history traits to morphological adaptations, yielding complex aging patterns across free-ranging tetrapods (*1*). Long-term studies of species from wild populations are necessary for understanding such complexity in the natural context in which aging evolved (*66*), and enable the use of more accurate aging metrics. Our compilation of long-term field studies clarifies mechanisms underlying the evolution of aging rate in tetrapod vertebrates, highlighting links among protective phenotypes, life-history tactics, and aging variation in the wild.

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Tables S1 to S8

References (67-89)

Data S1

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 **Fig. 1. Tetrapod ectotherms and their measures of aging.** The rate of aging is the Gompertz slope parameter indicating how mortality risk increases with age (in number of years since first reproduction). Longevity is the number of years from the age of first reproduction at which 95% 467 of the individuals in a population have died. Error bars show  $+/-1$  SD for species for which multiple populations were analyzed. Shading represents taxonomic orders. The number next to the bar represents the number of populations included in this study. Figure was made with iTOL (*89*) and silhouettes are available on phylopic.org.

![](_page_31_Figure_0.jpeg)

![](_page_31_Figure_1.jpeg)

 **Fig. 2. Measures of rates of aging and longevity across ectotherms.** Letters denote statistical 473 significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) across orders after correcting for body mass and phylogeny (Table S2). Bars show +/- 1 SE. Points are uncorrected values for visualization. The rate of aging here is the mortality slope derived from a Gompertz model. Longevity is the number of years from the age of first reproduction at which 95% of the individuals in a population have died. Green denotes reptiles and purple denotes amphibians.

![](_page_32_Figure_0.jpeg)

481 **Fig. 3. Comparison between** 482 **ectothermic and endothermic** 483 **tetrapods for (A) rates of aging,** 484 **(B) longevity, and (C) the**  485 **relationship between aging rate**  <sup> $\circ$ </sup> and longevity. Trend lines  $\frac{1}{15}$  indicate the estimated slopes of each relationship, representing  $\theta$  the terms of interest for each model (predicted values not shown). Orange denotes endotherms and blue denotes ectotherms. Black lines in A and B show the conditional effect where the interaction term equals zero (no difference between endotherms and ectotherms). See Table 1 for P-values of these interactions.

![](_page_33_Figure_0.jpeg)

 **Fig 4. Slow-fast Continuum Hypothesis.** Solid lines show the estimated statistically significant 503  $(p < 0.05)$  relationships between variables and are derived from PGLSs from Table 2. Dashed lines are included for visualizing the contrasting class. Predicted values are not shown. Green denotes reptiles and purple denotes amphibians. The black line in C denotes the overall effect (no difference between reptiles and amphibians). Age at first reproduction and annual fecundity themselves did not differ by class (when controlling for phylogeny and body mass; Table S7).

508 **Table 1. Statistical output for PGLSs and phylogenetic ANCOVAs comparing ectotherms** 

### 509 **and endotherms for the Thermoregulatory Mode Hypothesis.** Group is a factor with two

- 510 levels: ectotherms vs. endotherms. Interaction (bold) terms denote group differences after
- 511 correcting for body mass plotted in Fig 3. These were not statistically significant for rate of aging
- 512 or longevity (see Fig 3).

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522 **Table 2. Statistical output for ectotherm PGLSs showing output of all predictor variables**

## 523 **for the Temperature, Protective Phenotypes, and Slow-fast Continuum Hypotheses.**

524 Protection is a factor with three levels: none, chemical, and physical. Class is a factor with two

- 525 levels: reptile and amphibian. Bold P-values correspond to tests of the specific hypothesis in
- 526 question.

![](_page_35_Picture_366.jpeg)

![](_page_36_Picture_171.jpeg)