



What is a Keystone Species?

A keystone species is an organism - animal or plant - that helps define an entire ecosystem - a geographic area where plants, animals, and other organisms, as well as weather and landscape, work together to form a "bubble" of life. Without its keystone species, the ecosystem would be dramatically altered or cease to exist altogether.

An example is the Gopher Tortoise, more specifically, its burrow.

The tortoise's burrow averages 15 feet long and 6.5 feet deep, though they have been documented reaching up to 40 feet long and 10 feet deep. The burrow is dug at a 30-degree angle from the surface. More than 350 different animals may use the burrow as a safe haven or their home. The animals that share the burrow live harmoniously.

Why would animals take shelter in the burrow?

- **Escape fire.** Animals would move into the burrow when fires are in the area giving them a protected shelter from fire and smoke.
- **Escape the heat of the day.** Similar to a ground-sheltered house or a cave, the temperature inside the burrow is several degrees cooler than the ground's surface.
- **Protection from heavy rain downpours**
- **Escape predators.**

Gopher Tortoise

The Gopher Tortoise is an endangered reptile living to about 60 years old in the wild and up to 100 years in captivity. Their front feet are shaped like shovels with wide flat sharp claws perfect for digging their burrow.

Their burrows are normally in drier areas. Their territory ranges from 1-114 acres for males and 0.2-14 acres for females.

Preferring a vegetarian diet, foods consists of broadleaf grasses, wiregrass, prickly pear, wild grape, blackberry and blueberry. They ingest their mineral supplements by munching on dried animal bones.

Just a Few of the Gopher Tortoise Burrow Visitors

Florida Mouse



Eastern Indigo Snake



Gopher Frog



Rabbit

