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Don't mess with me—my cousin's a dinosaur

28 November 1998
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THE textbook version of the turtle's family tree is all wrong, say scientists in Germany and Spain. Their study of turtle genetics has shown they are close relatives of dinosaurs, birds and crocodiles.

Standard biology texts class turtles as the most primitive living reptiles because their skulls, like those of the first reptiles, do not have holes where the jaw muscle attaches. But in a study of mitochondrial DNA, Axel Meyer of the University of Konstanz in Germany and Rafael Zardoya of the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Madrid have shown that turtles' closest living relatives are birds and crocodiles, with lizards, snakes and mammals being more distantly related (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, vol 95, p 14 226).

Meyer says turtles probably evolved solid skulls for the same reason they evolved shells to provide protection. "It is presumably an adaptation against predation," he says.



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