

## Giant Tortoises Under Threat by E. M. Fay

Tortoises are among the longest-living animals on earth. Land-dwelling turtles of the family Testudinidae, they are vegetarian reptiles. Although they are found on 6 of the seven continents and on some islands, most of the approx. 40 living species are in Africa, especially in Madagascar. Giant tortoises are believed to have developed at least as early as the Cretaceous Period, over 100 million years ago.

Slow-moving under their high, domed shells, giant tortoises have sturdy legs. In certain folklore, they represent determination, deliberateness, long life, and wisdom. When countries and cultures were relatively separate from one another, traditional cultural beliefs afforded a certain amount of protection to this ancient race. As Mr. Herilala Randriamahazo, an official of Madagascar's Turtle Survival Alliance says, "People respected tortoises. They did not even touch them."



<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13799205>

As man travelled more extensively around the world, however, and those humans from countries unfamiliar with giant tortoises "discovered" them, they tended to think of these majestic beings as just another resource to be exploited. Tortoises are now extinct on most of their former island homes because they were slaughtered for their meat and their shells. Their habitats were destroyed both by man himself, and by the introduction (by humans) to their islands of goats, pigs, rats, and other animals who ate their eggs and their young, and competed with them for food. Giant tortoises once native to some 30 islands in the Indian Ocean now have only one representative group living, those from South Aldabra Island.

In the Western Hemisphere, tortoises were plentiful on the Galapagos Islands until the late 19th century, but were later hunted to the point of extinction. And their habitat deteriorated when goats were brought in from the mainland.

There are several non-profit organizations working to try to preserve the dwindling number of giant tortoises left in the world. One of these is the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, founded by the internationally-renowned naturalist/author, Gerald Durrell. Their focus is on the rarest, most endangered species and most fragile habitats, and they have been working in Madagascar for 26 years, trying to save the Critically Endangered Ploughshare Tortoise.

Poaching of many species of flora and fauna is an extreme problem on this large land mass off the coast of southern Africa that some have called Treasure Island, due to its rich bio-diversity and hundreds of rare life forms that existed there for thousands of years – until man decided that making a profit from these treasures was more important than preserving them. In fact, in just the past decade, more than 600 new species have been discovered on Madagascar, but many are *already* endangered due to widespread pillaging.

**As just one example, a huge increase in demand for pet tortoises from Asia may doom forever the very rare Ploughshare Tortoise.** Their beautiful shells make them especially desirable as "exotic pets" to wealthy Asians, in particular, some paying as much as \$10,000 on the black market in Thailand and other countries. In order to save them from poachers, local villagers and a team from the Durrell WCT are purposely defacing the shells.

Richard Lewis, Director of Durrell's Madagascar program says the survival of these tortoises is "hanging by a thread" due to smugglers. Although they are officially protected under

Madagascar's national laws, an explosion of illicit demand has forced his organization to take the drastic step of engraving numbers (painlessly) on their distinctive shells in order to make the animals worthless, at least as status symbols. Lewis expressed his personal sadness at having to deface the unique shells, but hopes that it will prove a deterrent to thieves. The DWCT has also placed radio transmitters on the Ploughshares it has released into the wild, to keep track of them in case they are stolen.

"Many local people are proud of their unusual national reptile," Lewis added, "and want to help save them."

Baly Bay National Park in Madagascar used to be considered a safe haven for tortoises, but poachers are becoming increasingly aggressive. Conservationists call these criminals "the Tortoise Mafia," as their numerous thefts threaten the native reptiles with imminent extinction.

The Tortoise Mafia are known to bribe corrupt government officials. Smuggling networks are not only selling the tortoises to foreigners as pets and baby tortoise shells to "traditional" doctors to make into alleged aphrodisiacs for men, but also profiting from a growing local demand for tortoise meat.

The head of Madagascar's Alliance of Conservation Groups, Ndranto Razakamanarina, has said,

"Everybody is eating them and everybody is trafficking them and as soon as people are brought to trial, there are Mafia organisations who help to get them out."

The numbers of tortoises being smuggled out of the country is alarming. Two poachers caught last year in southern Madagascar had 50 tortoises with them. 400 baby tortoises have been crammed into suitcases, and adults are taken into captive breeding programs in Asian countries. The thieves often raid an area in groups of up to 100 men, who pick up thousands of tortoises at a time. They are usually heavily armed, so can easily fend off attempts to stop them. As one conservationist said, "When a gang of poachers with guns and machetes come and take tortoises, the villagers are defenseless."

Conservation groups on Madagascar have made some strides in protecting the island's endangered tortoises, which include the Ploughshare, Spider, Radiated, and Flat-tailed species. But increasing economic woes in recent times have added to the problem: higher food prices are blamed for more Madagascarians eating tortoise meat.

Mr. Randriamahazo went undercover as a "tourist" to investigate restaurants in several towns. He found that tortoise had become "a favourite snack," and that the very same government officials who ought to be protecting the native reptiles from extinction were themselves buying it surreptitiously in restaurants. He was horrified to learn that a bowl of tortoise meat was sold for (the equivalent of) a mere \$2.50. Local streets were littered with countless shells, "an unfortunate sign of the insatiable appetite people have acquired for them." As a BBC report noted, "If tortoises do not end up in the rubbish heaps of restaurants, they end up in the suitcases of tortoise smugglers."

The government has been accused by a consortium of 27 national conservation groups of shameful complicity in the "looting and plunder" of natural resources, including the illegal trade in tortoises.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13799205>

The future looks bleak for giant tortoises, even if poaching were to stop immediately – an unlikely scenario given the profit incentive and apparent lack of government concern. Mr. Hasina Randriamanampisoa of the Durrell WCT stated, "Even if the poaching stops now, the natural habitat is so vast, there are chances that the females cannot meet the males in the wild to mate and to have babies."

Other endangered large tortoises and turtles include the Burmese starred tortoise, which is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of "critically endangered" species (<http://www.iucn.org>), eaten both by Burmese and Chinese; and the Giant Amazon River Turtle, also because it is widely poached, as well as habitat destruction.

Having survived for over 100 million years, it is tragic that giant tortoises seem likely to become extinct in the wild very soon because of greed and ignorance. The few who survive may do so while kept in wretched captivity and bred only so that their children may be eaten or

destroyed for other nefarious purposes. Only a few animals such as crocodilians and sharks (and occasional anomalies such as coelacanths) are in a similar category as having survived relatively unchanged since prehistoric times, and of course, they, too, are exploited mercilessly.

To see a moving slide show and hear Durrell WCT Director Richard Lewis speak eloquently about the Ploughshare Tortoise, go to: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/14293351>

**E. M. Fay** is Assoc. Ed. of *Wildlife Watch Binocular*.

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## Help Save the Giant Tortoise

Conservation work is not possible without the support of concerned people. There are numerous ways to help, such as joining conservation groups as a member or fundraising for them, “adopting” an animal by making a small regular donation, or volunteering your time. Any of these measures can make a significant difference to the tortoises and other animals, habitats, and local communities where they live.

For more creative ideas, go to <http://www.durrell.org/How-to-help>

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## George, the Last Pinta Tortoise, Dies in Ecuador



“Lonesome George,” a giant tortoise who is believed to be the last surviving member of his sub-species, died in June at Galapagos National Park in Ecuador. Originally from Pinta Island, part of the Galapagos chain, George has no offspring, so scientists fear that his kind is now extinct.

Although George was approximately 100 years old, that made him still a fairly young adult, as his sub-species can live to 200 years under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, giant tortoises are not often left alone to live their lives out

fully.

Biologists at the Galapagos National Park tried for decades to help Pinta Island tortoises survive by introducing George to lady tortoises from similar sub-species. He lived with one particular mate for 15 years, but unfortunately, none of their eggs were viable.

Known worldwide as a symbol of the Galapagos Islands, the place of the tortoise in human-written history was made secure by Charles Darwin, whose notice of the differing appearances among island tortoises helped him devise his ground-breaking theory of evolution.

George was found dead in his corral by his long-time keeper. Cause of death is awaiting a post-mortem. His body will be embalmed so that future generations may see him.

If a concerted effort is not made *now* to prevent such extinctions as that of the Pinta Island tortoise – and animal extinctions are happening with disturbing frequency – then the next generation of humans will have nothing but the pitiful sight of all sorts of embalmed creatures.

Farewell, George. Your passing, and the extinction of your species horrifies and saddens us greatly.

Full story at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-18574279>