

Calls for international co-operation to save the Ploughshare Tortoise

In recent years, the Ploughshare Tortoise *Astrochelys yniphora* has become much sought after in the international pet trade, particularly in South-east Asia, owing to its beauty and rarity, such that demand is pushing the species perilously close to extinction.

On 15 March 2013, The Royal Thai Customs and their counterparts in the CITES Management Authority found 54 Ploughshare Tortoises and 21 Radiated Tortoises *Astrochelys radiata* at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Bangkok. This is the largest single seizure of Ploughshare Tortoises in history. A Thai man was arrested as he attempted to collect a bag containing the tortoises from a luggage carousel. The bag was registered to a woman who had flown from Madagascar to Bangkok via Nairobi; she was also arrested.

The Ploughshare Tortoise, like all four endemic tortoises from Madagascar, is assessed as being Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Leuteritz and Pedrono, 2008). It is one of the rarest tortoises in the world with an adult wild population numbering in the low hundreds (Pedrono and Sarovy, 2000; Richard Lewis, *in litt.*, 2013) and a range of only 1500 km² (Pedrono and Sarovy, 2000). The species is listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Madagascar became a signatory to CITES in 1975, where this species is also totally protected by national legislation. Thailand became a signatory in 1983.

While commercial exploitation has persisted for centuries (Pedrono, 2000), prior to 2000, the greatest threats to the Ploughshare Tortoise were bush fires (Bour, 2007). However, since the beginning of this century, illegal poaching and trade has dramatically increased, and is now the most severe threat to the species's survival (Bour, 2007). The majority of the animals being smuggled out of Madagascar are bound for growing markets in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and other parts of Asia.

Surveys carried out by TRAFFIC in South-east Asia have found Ploughshare Tortoises to be frequently offered for sale illegally in markets in Indonesia (Shepherd and Nijman, 2007; Stengel *et al.*, 2011) and Thailand (Nijman and Shepherd, 2007). In Jakarta, Indonesia, the species has been observed openly displayed at reptile trade fairs (Stengel *et al.*, 2011).

In an effort to raise the profile of the species—and much needed funds—the Turtle Conservancy hosted a gala dinner and art auction in New York at which four speakers from the Turtle Conservancy, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, and TRAFFIC highlighted the plight of turtles and tortoises, with the focus on the Ploughshare Tortoise.

Two days later a meeting of the International Ploughshare Tortoise Working Group was convened, to discuss practical solutions to combat the immediate threat of extinction facing the Ploughshare Tortoise, including issues pertaining to enforcement, captive breeding, public awareness and more.

High-level commitment is needed to save the species, including increased co-operation between the governments of Madagascar and the end market countries, such as Thailand. Currently, a Memorandum of Understanding between these two countries is being discussed, which will be aimed at increasing co-operation and communication, joint enforcement activities and repatriation of confiscated tortoises.

Increased protection at the site-level, and increased enforcement efforts at airports in transit and consumer countries were also discussed at the Working Group meeting. Current measures being taken to reduce the demand for the species, such as defacing the carapace of the Ploughshare Tortoise to reduce its value and allow for identification, are ongoing but also need to be adopted by countries seizing the animals. The key is international co-operation on all fronts.

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