

A Note on the Hunting of Radiated Tortoises in the Beheloka Region, Southwest Madagascar

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This communiqué deals with the collection of Radiated Tortoises, *Geochelone radiata*, in the coastal region of Beheloka, Madagascar, approximately 60 km south of Toliara. This tortoise, endemic to Madagascar, is listed as vulnerable by the IUCN and is on Appendix I of CITES.

Discussions with the primary coordinator of local collections were held in May 2002. Although the activity is known to be illegal, the interviewee was willing to cooperate in return for anonymity.

In some ethnic groups the tortoises have in the past been protected by *fady* (local taboos), however the interviewee stated that years of poor agricultural production and low fishery production have led to the abandonment of this taboo. The interviewee stated that there were no longer tortoises found within 4 or 5 km of Beheloka village. Although the interviewee was the only tortoise hunter in the region, he stated that two or three *lakana* (Malagasy dugout canoes) come down from Toliara two or three times

per month to collect tortoises. He mainly gathers tortoises for special occasions in the region, however they also collect for the pet trade, for food, for the fabrication of jewelry etc. A large animal being sold for as much as 25,000FMG (~4USD). Profitability is ensured through the collection of large numbers of tortoises along the coast, with 40 or 50 tortoises being transported in each canoe.

These figures lead us to conclude that 1,920 to 5,400 tortoises are collected every year. Although, it was not stated exactly where these animals originated, other observations suggest that collecting occurs wherever there is suitable habitat in the southwest. It also became apparent from further discussions that although the tortoises are caught year round, more are collected during the rainy season (December to March).

The interviewee was asked about trends in population numbers. He was not worried about decreasing numbers as he believes that radiated tortoises have 15 surviving

hatchlings from a nest of 20 eggs/year. In reality, radiated tortoises have roughly three to five eggs per clutch and five to six nests/year (Behler, pers. comm.). He also stated that if young or eggs were found they were left alone.

It seems clear that there is an urgent need for more information about this illegal trade and the distribution of basic facts about *G. radiata*. Recommendations include further interviews north and south of Toliara and completion of transects around southwest Madagascar to ascertain population densities.

The interviews for this note were conducted with the aid of Sarah de Mowbray, Katherine Usher and Victoria Randall as part of the Frontier-Madagascar Coastal Research Programme, based in Beheloka, Southwest Madagascar.

For further information on this topic, review John Behler's article "Madagascar Tortoise Crisis" in the 5th issue of this newsletter.