

Update to the British Chelonia Group on 2012 Tortoise Work 22/10/2012

Madagascar flat-tailed tortoise (*Pyxis planicauda*)

The *Pyxis* are doing well. We hatched 5 babies in 2011/2012 season so now have 83 young animals ready for a release. We won't release that many at first. We will start with 10-20 animals for a trial release in the Andranomena Special Reserve, but this will not be until late 2013. We need sufficient lead time to get the required permits, finalise planning, and to undertake health screening of the captive animals which we will be undertaking this upcoming wet season when the animals wake up. The major delay to date is that we have been developing the most rigorous protocol possible to ensure that the released animals pose no risk to the wild ones.

Ploughshare tortoise (*Astrochelys yniphora*)

In November of 2011 we continued the ploughshare release programme in Baly Bay. Lee Durrell presided over the official ceremony to move the tortoises from Ampijoroa. Twenty animals were transferred to the pre-release enclosure in Beaboaly and then released in December of 2011. We now have 60 release animals in Beaboaly. All of the released animals have been engraved, injected with microchips, and fitted with radio-transmitters. The 20 most recent animals have all been intensively monitored post-release and are gaining weight.

A major result for the ploughshare tortoise conservation programme was the discovery in March of two baby ploughshares (about a year old) within our release site. These are the offspring of our captive born and raised released ploughshares, signifying that the captive breeding and release programme is successful. Finding these baby ploughshares at the release site in Beaboaly represents the work of a large number of people within Durrell over the last 25 years.

In January work commenced to redevelop our quarantine facilities in Antananarivo and review our breeding and husbandry procedures in Ampijoroa. A new quarantine centre for our tortoises was completed in Ampijoroa in August and looks fantastic. The 32 tortoises that were being held in quarantine in Antananarivo have now been moved to this new building, which has provided a new facility for the best management of the animals undergoing their six month quarantine period before entering the main captive population.

Five young ploughshare tortoises arrived at the Durrell Wildlife Park in Jersey in September, part of a previously confiscated illegal shipment that had been housed at Kadoorie Botanic Garden, Hong Kong. The animals are currently housed in a quarantine room and are part of a safety-net European population, along with others at Chester and Rotterdam zoos.

The National Tortoise Action Plan was approved by the Minister of the Environment in Madagascar. This means there is now an accepted regional strategic framework to act upon for tortoise conservation within Madagascar. A CBS episode of 60 Minutes focused on the plight of the ploughshare tortoise and our conservation efforts is scheduled to be aired in early October.

At the Chelonian Captive Breeding Centre in Ampijoroa we currently have 24 ploughshare tortoise eggs being incubated naturally in nests, and 25 eggs being incubated artificially in an incubator. 2011 was the first ever successful hatching of ploughshare tortoises in an incubator with 7 hatchlings in 2011 and the latest news, hot off the presses, is that 5 more baby ploughshares have hatched this September-October in the incubators. This is a significant achievement as it will allow us to better control the sexes of our new hatchlings (females are produced when the nest temperature is 30-32 °C while males are produced at nest temperatures of 27-29 °C). As we currently have a skewed sex ratio of 5 females to every male in the captive population, this new management tool will allow us to bring our captive population to a more desired ratio of 2 females to every male.



Jaborabe and Henri Rakotosalama with two young ploughshare tortoises produced by our release animals in Beaboaly. Photo: Robert Bourou.



Dr. Lee Durrell with ploughshare tortoises in pre-release enclosure at Beoboaly. Photo : Kitty Brayne.



Ploughshare tortoise hatching in incubator in Ampijoroa in September 2012. Photo: Ernest Bekarany.



Ernest Bekarany and Basilisse in new ploughshare tortoise quarantine facility in Ampijoroa. Photo: Lance Woolaver