

Madagascar's radiated tortoise threatened with extinction

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A team of biologists from the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Turtle Survival Alliance have reported that Madagascar's radiated tortoise -- of the world's most beautiful tortoise species -- is being hunted to extinction. Credit: Julie Larsen Maher/Wildlife Conservation Society

A team of biologists from the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) reported today that Madagascar's radiated tortoise - considered one of the most beautiful tortoise species - is rapidly nearing extinction due to rampant hunting for its meat and the illegal pet trade.

The team predicts that unless drastic [conservation](#) measures take place, the species will be driven to extinction within the next 20 years.

The team recently returned from field surveys in southern Madagascar's

spiny forest, where the once-abundant tortoises occur. They found entire regions devoid of tortoises and spoke with local people who reported that armed bands of poachers had taken away truckloads of tortoises to supply open meat markets in towns such as Beloha and Tsihombe. Poaching camps have been discovered with the remains of thousands of radiated tortoises, and truckloads of tortoise meat have been seized recently.

"Areas where scores of radiated tortoises could be seen just a few years ago have been poached clean," said James Deutsch, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Africa Program. "Back then one could hardly fathom that this beautiful tortoise could ever become endangered, but such is the world we live in, and things can - and do - change rapidly."

"The rate of hunting of radiated tortoises is similar to the hunting pressure on American bison during the early 19th century, where they were nearly hunted to extinction when they once numbered in the tens of millions," said Brian D. Horne, turtle conservation coordinator for the Wildlife Conservation Society's Species Program.

Tortoise populations near urban centers have crashed with poachers moving closer and closer to protected areas; it is simply a matter of time before those areas are targeted too, the biologists predict.

"Radiated tortoises are truly under siege now as never before, and if we can't draw a line in the sand around protected areas, then we will lose this species" said Rick Hudson, president of the TSA. "I can't think of a tortoise species that has undergone a more rapid rate of decline in modern times, or a more drastic contraction in range, than the radiated tortoise. This is a crisis situation of the highest magnitude."



The once abundant radiated tortoise has disappeared from wide areas of its native habitat in southern Madagascar due to hunting for food and the illegal pet trade. Credit: Julie Larsen Maher/Wildlife Conservation Society

Formerly occupying a vast swath of the southern portion of the island nation of Madagascar - the radiated tortoise was once considered one of the world's most abundant tortoise species, with an estimated population in the millions. It is now ranked as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List.

One of the most troubling trends is that poachers are now entering protected areas (Special Reserves, National Parks, World Heritage Sites) to collect tortoises and the staff there are poorly equipped to patrol and protect populations. The situation is exacerbated by several factors:

1. Years of extreme drought that have led to diminished agricultural production and increased poverty, which leads people to tortoise hunting for survival;
2. Enforcement action is often days away so that local officials do not have the capacity to stop [poachers](#);

3. Severe habitat degradation has made the spiny forest the most endangered forest type in Madagascar. After burning and clearing for agriculture invasive plant species take over and today thick stands of opuntia (prickly pear) and sisal (agave) dominate the landscape;
4. Current political instability has resulted in an increased open access to natural resources and illegal pet trade.

The radiated tortoise is still able to "make a living" and survive in this degraded habitat. However, the tortoise cannot survive the current threat of wholesale collection for food markets. Community mobilization linked to sustainable habitat protection is needed to save this unique critically endangered species.

Dr. John Robinson, WCS's executive vice president for Conservation Science, testified before Congress recommending that freshwater turtles and tortoises receive greater attention under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-administered Marine Turtle Conservation Fund.

The Wildlife Conservation Society's Bronx Zoo owns many radiated tortoises kept at the Behler Chelonian Conservation Center and other U.S. zoos and about a dozen held at the WCS Bronx Zoo. Many of these are Species Survival Program-recommended animals for breeding. These animals form a significant percentage of the animals in the U.S.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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