

## **Additional Observations on the February – March 2015 Ploughshare Tortoise Field Season**

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After reflecting on my latest Ploughshare Field update, I realized that I had focused only on the challenges at hand (while in the field) and neglected to reflect on the positive results we have accomplished. Here, I'd like to summarize my view of those outcomes and reiterate some recommendations for future work.

***CLP patrols*** – over the past few years, Durrell and the TC have managed to get the resources on the ground needed to establish working relations within communities and identify and train locals at each of the main villages adjacent to Ploughshare Tortoise habitat. This is no small feat considering the isolation and pervasive distrust of outsiders within the area. We now have a network of locals which whom we can work and, through continued visits and other such displays of good faith, we can continue to build a vetted network as well as nurture a growing base of community members supportive of the conservation effort.

*Benefits:*

- Locals are in the forest on a regular basis
- Local networks become aware of our efforts
- The training and monitoring of whom gives us the opportunity to continually revisit the areas and ensure a good, working relationship with communities

***Engrave 'em to save 'em*** – We have been trialing what started out as a controversial method in the conservation of this species; Dremel engraving. Thus far, a little over 60 wild animals have been engraved. Only a single sub-adult with these marks has been taken and recovered. Being a trial, we are unsure of the efficacy of this method, but are in agreement that the minimal effort involved is worth the potential benefits.

*Benefits:*

- Easy identification of each individual animal
- Poaching deterrent due to obvious evidence of illegal harvest

***Telemetry technicians*** – by far and away this effort has been the greatest success for which I was involved in the areas where adequate funding was available (thanks to the piggy-backing on the other efforts). Beginning in 2012 in Cape Sada, we deployed transmitters and were able to track more than a dozen animals over a period of three years. During that time, our teams quickly found and reported shocking evidence of trespassing and poaching (you might remember the hacked transmitters!). We since tried to get support and expand these efforts to other main sites, but lack of adequate funding limited our reach and ability to support the trackers. This had been

heartbreaking because we were able to get some, but not all of the needed equipment over time, and the trackers were crippled in their efforts. I believe the efforts to expand were worthwhile (allowing us to continue to nurture community relationships in the revisits and allowed me to re-sample with greater ease), but the sites didn't work well as tracking sites. However, after winning our MBZ grant last year, I was able to purchase the rest of the needed equipment, and with the TCF grant's travel funds, we were able to get the equipment out to the sites this year! Durrell and Angelo have been working hard to make sure the equipment is cared for and the trackers get training help needed.

*Benefits:*

- A form of patrol *with* accountability (in GPS proof and datasheets)
- Poaching deterrent because patrols are in the exact areas where the tortoises are found (as opposed to only where trails already exist)
- Results in useable and publishable data that could result in management decisions which have as little as a few weeks between collection and implementation
- Created a core network of highly skilled patrolmen who are reliable and have been given the capacity (both in equipment and support) to make time-critical reports of illicit activities
- Provides the data needed for the implementation of the SMART system
- Actual monitoring of individual tortoises

***Future directions*** – This is, of course, a difficult section to write as we all know that the challenges that we face in the field are both diverse and mutable. However, at this point, we should be confident that our continued presence is needed and our efforts thus far (albeit challenging at times) have been creating awareness at the local level, resulting in a net positive outcome. As of this point in time, we have discussed considering the following to move forward:

- Collaborations with Madagascar National Parks and Gendarme in the field need be continually assessed and nurtured
- Continue support of the radio-tracking program and invest further (maintain field visit support, cell communication, and equipment support)
- Hire a field project coordinator/manager for the Baly Bay region who is able to coordinate CLPs, telemetry techs, and site-specific personnel with the capacity to solve field-related problems quickly and manage all field data
- Locally-sourced field equipment and supplies to the furthest extent possible
- Expand CLPs (especially in the far west where habitat is vast) and monitor closely and often
- Continue engraving newly found animals as well as ensure it has been done to the furthest extent possible on animals we already have (Ampijoroa and telemetered)

More work can be done, but the funding has been difficult to come by, especially considering the high expense to just maintain the project now (CLP salaries alone are approximately \$30k/year and we can see that is insufficient at present level). I will be working with the Turtle Conservancy and Durrell as far as they would like my assistance in contributing to a strategy for future work and management plans.

Thank you all for your support!

~Andrea