

ENVIRONMENT

Madagascar's Largest Tortoise Could Become Extinct In 2 Years

BY SHREYA DASGUPTA ON 30/09/2016 • [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Fewer than 100 ploughshare tortoises remain in the wild, conservationists estimate and continued poaching of these animals for the illegal pet trade is likely to wipe out the last few individuals in the next two to three years.



Poaching of the ploughshare tortoise has reached its peak over the last year, conservationists warn. Credit: Peter Paul van Dijk/Global Wildlife Conservation via Mongabay.

Fewer than 100 ploughshare tortoises (*Astrochelys yniphora*) remain in the wild, conservationists estimate and continued poaching of these

animals for the illegal pet trade is likely to wipe out the last few individuals in the next two to three years. A coalition of conservation groups made this announcement in a statement to governments attending the ongoing Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) in Johannesburg, South Africa.

“I think the loss of the ploughshare tortoise would be a tragedy and damning indictment of the state of things in Madagascar,” Andrew Terry of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust told *Mongabay*. “This is not only an ancient species that has every right to exist and not to be traded into extinction, but it is another example of how external forces are able to strip out the country’s natural resources with impunity.”



Fewer than 100 ploughshare are estimated to occur in the wild. Photo courtesy of Global Wildlife Conservation. Fewer than 100 ploughshare are estimated to occur in the wild.

Credit: Peter Paul van Dijk/Global Wildlife Conservation.

Currently listed as ‘critically endangered’ in the IUCN Red List, the ploughshare tortoise occurs only in the Baly Bay National Park in northwestern Madagascar. This park was established specifically for the protection of this species in its natural habitat, scientists say. However, the animal’s striking gold and black domed shell has made it a prized pet in the international market, fuelling organised poaching and trafficking that is driving the species towards extinction.

In fact, poaching of the ploughshare tortoise has reached its peak over the last year, conservationists warn in the statement. Since early 2016, tortoises appear to have disappeared completely from several areas of the Baly Bay National Park.

This rapid disappearance of the ploughshare tortoise is partly because the national park is extremely difficult to patrol, Terry said. “It lies along the coast and so there is a porous border for poachers to use to gain access to the park. The habitat is difficult to monitor and patrols have limited capacity and equipment for patrolling. These are issues that we are currently trying to address.”

Elizabeth Bennet, vice president of Species Conservation, at the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), told Mongabay that enforcement of law at airports has also been lax, which has enabled easy movement of shipments of poached animals from Madagascar.

“Some tortoise and turtle species are difficult for enforcement officers to identify,” Bennet said. “Ploughshares, with their distinctive projecting outgrowth of the lower carapace, as well as its markings, make it highly distinctive and easy to identify, so that it is not a reason for the lack of law enforcement for this species.”

Conservationists have tried a number of strategies to prevent these rare tortoises from being stolen. One of these strategies has been to permanently engrave serial numbers on the tortoise shells to make them less attractive to buyers. But marking does not seem to have deterred poachers, conservationists say.

“First, the marks can, with some work, be made less conspicuous,” Bennet said. “Second, some buyers are clearly willing to buy marked animals.”

In fact, Terry’s team saw a number of marked animals being sold on Facebook early this year.

“So we know that it is no longer an effective deterrent,” he said. “People are willing to buy animals, which effectively have the statement “I am stolen” written on them. Although given that there are no legal animals in the trade, anyone buying a ploughshare must know that its illegal.”

To recover from the current crisis, conservation groups have urged the government of Madagascar to “develop effective and long-term solutions.” This includes “actively and resolutely pursuing all observed infractions regarding poaching or trafficking of ploughshare tortoises”, as well as “working with international partners to establish a national Wildlife Crime Unit to deal with crimes related to these tortoises.”

“At one time, conservation efforts for the ploughshare tortoise were a model of successful species restoration,” Terry said. “But the rapid increase and all-encompassing pressure from poaching has undone so much of this good work. We know we can bring this species back — we just need to stop the poaching.”

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