

Keeping Rare Turtles And Tortoises Safe From Poachers

The shells of turtles and tortoises are very valuable on the black market. The more rare the shell, the more money it is worth. Poachers kill endangered turtles and tortoises for their shells. This greedy, unethical practice has put the very existence of these animals in danger.



Conservationists at the Turtle Conservancy's Center in California have come up with a way to protect these turtles and tortoises. It may seem strange, but these conservationists are intentionally damaging turtle and tortoise shells. This makes the shell less valuable to the poachers.

"It's heartbreaking that it's come to this. But it's the right thing to do," Paul Gibbons said. Gibbons is the managing director of the non-profit conservancy center.

Paul Gibbons gently places a 13.5 kilogram, 30 pound, adult female ploughshare tortoise on a small table. With a steady hand, he carves a code onto its rounded shell. The tortoise feels no pain as he does this, and she doesn't seem to mind the inconvenience.

The code will identify the tortoise so it can be tracked. She will be branded for life, which could be around 160 years for this tortoise.

The Conservancy's goal is to mark every one of the estimated 360 ploughshares in captive breeding programs around the world. It also hopes to mark the 300 or so ploughshares believed to be remaining in the wild.

So far, the program seems to be working. No rare tortoise or turtle with identification markings has turned up in an illegal market, conservationists said.

The ploughshare tortoise is the rarest tortoise on Earth. It is highly valued by global animal traffickers, and one ploughshare tortoise can fetch tens of thousands of dollars on the Asian black market.

Ploughshare tortoises are native to Madagascar. The two ploughshare tortoises marked Tuesday were found in Taiwan in 2008. The female, now known as No. 7001 MG, was successfully mated last year with the only male ploughshare tortoise of breeding age outside Madagascar.

Rare turtle and tortoise shells are sought by collectors all over the world. Recently, officials at an airport in Jakarta, Indonesia rescued more than 8,000 baby pig-nosed turtles. The turtles were being smuggled in suitcases. Officials believe their destination was China and Singapore.

Authorities in Thailand recently discovered 432 protected tortoises and 52 black pond turtles worth about \$110,000. They were found in unclaimed luggage arriving from Bangladesh.

In another incident, authorities seized 54 ploughshare tortoises found in the suitcases of two people attempting to enter Thailand.

The Conservancy is certified by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, but it is not open to the public, and its location is kept secret. The only people who are allowed in are turtle biologists from around the world.

The Conservancy's primary mission is to maintain colonies of threatened and endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles. Christine Light manages the care of eggs and the records of the Conservancy's turtles. It is her job to pamper the clusters of eggs until they hatch and then the babies until they are old enough to fend for themselves.

"This little fella hatched on Monday," Light said, holding up an Indian spotted turtle about the size of a half-dollar coin. "Too cute for words, right?"

"Last year, we had 294 hatchlings from 13 different species. Each one of those hatchlings was a little win for our side."