

Voices for Wildlife

Perspectives from the 2016 Conference of the Parties | CITES

The Ploughshare Tortoise's Countdown to Extinction

By Susan Lieberman, Peter Paul van Dijk, Eric Goode, Andrew Terry, and Rick Hudson

For millions of years, the ploughshare tortoise (*Astrochelys yniphora*) has borne witness to the history of its only home on the planet: Madagascar. The tortoise was around when humans first settled Madagascar 2,000 years ago, persisting through the establishment of trading settlements in the 1500s.

The species lived through the pirates that used the island as a base and the establishment of the first kingdom in the 1700s. The reptiles have held on even through the extinction of other wildlife species (many due to overhunting by people), and endured two recent cyclones.



Ploughshares are highly valued in the global pet trade, particularly by private collectors, because of their beautiful and large golden-domed shell. Credit: Peter Paul van Dijk.

Yet these ancient creatures, which have hung on for millennia, are now on the very verge of extinction in the wild—possibly within the next two years.

Demand has been ravaging the last population of the rare tortoises. Ploughshares are highly valued in the global pet trade, particularly by private collectors, because of their beautiful and large golden-domed shell. In the last five years, we've seen a massive surge in poaching to satisfy the demand from such collectors, primarily in China and Southeast Asia, who will pay top dollar due to the species' rarity; this is pushing the tortoise out of existence.



There are now fewer than 100 mature adults left in the wild — all in Madagascar’s Baly Bay National Park, which was protected in 1997 specifically to save this species. Credit: Peter Paul van Dijk.

This year has been the worst in history for the ploughshare (also called the angonoka tortoise), which is Madagascar’s largest tortoise and significant to the country’s natural heritage. We estimate there are now fewer than 100 mature adults left in the wild, all in Madagascar’s Baly Bay National Park, which was protected in 1997 specifically to save this species.

This week the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is convening its 17th Conference of the Parties (CoP17) in Johannesburg. The delegations will focus on refining, managing, and enforcing international rules around wildlife trade.

The ploughshare is listed on CITES Appendix I, which bans all international commercial trade in the species. We urge the government of Madagascar and the other Parties to CITES to prioritize putting a swift end to the illegal international trade of the ploughshare tortoise.



The ploughshare (also called the angonoka) tortoise is Madagascar’s largest tortoise and significant to the country’s natural heritage. Credit: Peter Paul van Dijk.

We are specifically calling for the government of Madagascar to enforce poaching and trafficking laws by prosecuting all poachers caught breaking the laws; to commit resources adequate to the enforcement needs of Baly Bay National Park; and to build institutional and technical capacity of customs at the country’s major airport. CITES is well positioned to play a powerful and crucial role to ensure implementation of these mechanisms.

The ploughshare tortoise is not the only animal falling victim to the willingness of collectors to pay high prices for rare species; the illegal wildlife trade has become a major global threat to wildlife worldwide. But CoP17 marks what is likely the last opportunity for the world to effectively intervene in this unprecedented biodiversity emergency in Madagascar.



CITES party governments must seize the opportunity now at CoP17 to make sure we do what it takes to safeguard the ploughshare tortoise's continued existence as it faces imminent annihilation. Credit: Peter Paul van Dijk.

We believe the ploughshare's inherent value as a unique species is worth far more than any price poachers might collect to take them out of the wild. As with many other wildlife species, we're only beginning to scratch the surface of understanding this tortoise's complex and profound connection to our own existence.

We call upon all CITES party governments to seize this opportunity now at CoP17 as a matter of urgency, and to make sure we do what it takes to safeguard the ploughshare tortoise's continued existence as it faces imminent annihilation.

Susan Lieberman is Vice President for International Policy at [WCS \(Wildlife Conservation Society\)](#); Peter Paul van Dijk is Field Conservation Programs Director with the [Turtle Conservancy](#) and Associate Conservation Scientist for [Global Wildlife Conservation](#); Eric Goode is President of the [Turtle Conservancy](#); Andrew Terry is Head of Field Programs at the [Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust](#); Rick Hudson is President and CEO of the [Turtle Survival Alliance](#).