

EXPLOITATION OF TORTOISES IN EASTERN EUROPE

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Problems concerning the conservation of Mediterranean tortoises (genus *Testudo* L.) have been highlighted by Lambert (1984), but little information was presented on the situation in Eastern Europe.

Many amateur herpetologists from Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, mostly secondary school students, make private visits to the Balkan peninsula, especially Bulgaria, during their summer vacations to collect amphibians and reptiles. Apart from lizards and such relatively scarce snakes as *Eryx jaculus* and *Elaphe situla*, many take home a large number of tortoises, *Testudo graeca iberica* and *Testudo h. hermanni*, both of which occur throughout much of Bulgaria (Beshkov, 1984). Juveniles are mostly collected for they are easier to transport than big, mature adults. A small proportion of the tortoises are retained in a terrarium or given as gifts to friends and relatives, but the greater proportion enter trade and are for sale in pet shops. An estimated 500-600 tortoises enter Hungary in this way annually, brought in by amateurs from Bulgaria, and this figure is increasing. Hungarian dealers pay 200-500 forints (£3-8) per specimen and sell them off at 300-800 forints (£5-12). To give some indication of the relative cost of these creatures, an "average working man's" mean monthly income in Hungary is about 5200 forints (£80). Referring to the red-eared terrapin, *Chrysemys scripta*, which is heavily exploited in the U.S.A. (Warwick, 1986) and exported, a retailer recently visiting the University of Veterinary Sciences in Budapest said that it was in his interest financially to allow turtles to perish at the buyer's home as quickly as possible so that the child for whom the creature is a pet will whimper to his parents to buy another as a replacement. Although referring to *Chrysemys picta*, the same probably applies to tortoises. Most of the dealers therefore do not provide proper information on their correct care and breeding. This attitude is probably confirmed for, as a result, many amateurs make visits every day to Dr M. Janisch, an authority at the Department of General Zoology and Parasitology (University of Veterinary Sciences, Budapest), bringing with them their pet tortoises in an extremely weak condition. This is large due to their being kept in unsuitable conditions and provided with inappropriate food.

Attention has been drawn to the decline of tortoises in Bulgaria by Dr Vladimir Beshkov (Zoological Institute, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia) — mainly due to increasingly intensive agriculture (Beshkov, 1984) — whom is aware that despite protection, many tortoises and other reptiles are being exported illegally to other Eastern European countries (German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Hungary). In his paper, he makes the plea that the "protection of tortoises should be intensified by raising public awareness on their status as protected animals (under an ordinance 128/1981 by the State Committee on Environmental Protection) and discontinuing illegal collection by poachers and tourists". In other words, existing regulations should be made more publicly known and enforced. Dr Beshkov has produced and distributed a poster against the illegal export of tortoises from Bulgaria.

The importation of tortoises to Hungary by amateurs began in the early 1980s, but unfortunately, Hungarian Nature Protection Laws, prohibiting trade, only apply to Hungarian species of herpetofauna. They do not regulate the entry of amphibians and reptiles from outside. However, since Hungary has been a signatory of the Washington Convention (CITES) since 1985, trade in internationally protected species is officially prohibited there as well. Somewhat regrettably, there is no real control on the conditions of transporting, keeping and selling animals.

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