

REPORT ON THE REPATRIATION OF TORTOISES TO GREECE BY THE CARAPAX CENTRE (ITALY)

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INTRODUCTION

Between 26 September and 5 October 1991, 275 tortoises *Testudo hermanni boettgeri* were repatriated to Greece by Centro CARAPAX, the Italian Centre for Conservation, Scientific Research and Repopulation of Mediterranean Chelonians.

The operation was co-funded by the Tuscan delegation of WWF (Florence), TRAFFIC Europe (Brussels), WWF Italy (Rome) and the CARAPAX Centre itself. The whole operation was made possible through the help and confidence of the Belgian and Greek Ministries of Agriculture, the inspection service (AID) of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, and the Greek company, Olympic Airways, especially its office in Rome and the airfreight manager, Mr B. Magnani. Co-operation and assistance was also received from the Forestry Department of Thessaloniki and members of the Greek Ornithological Society (Thessaloniki), CARAPAX and the RANA Group, who manage the CARAPAX Centre, would like to thank all those who helped in this operation.

WHY THE REPATRIATION?

Since 1984, Mediterranean tortoises have been protected by two European directives, CITES Annex C1 and the Bern Convention Annex 1, as well as by national and regional legislation throughout Europe. Nevertheless, an illegal trade from Mediterranean to Northern European countries still continues. In Italy, *T. h. boettgeri* on the black market now replaces the indigenous *Testudo hermanni hermanni*, which has become very rare and thus its collection for commercial purposes as pets is of no interest from an economic point of view. Yugoslav and Greek *T. h. boettgeri* are liberated or escape into natural areas where *T. h. hermanni* still survives are a danger, for interbreeding will destroy the Italian genetic makeup of the subspecies. For this reason, it is therefore important to point out to the authorities and the public at large that two forms of the "common" tortoise exist and the danger that interbreeding represents.

In 1991 several hundreds of illegally imported tortoises, consisting mostly *T. h. boettgeri*, were confiscated in Italy, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. They were sent to the CARAPAX Centre in Italy and the Village des Tortues (SOPTOM) in southern France. A solution had to be found for these animals' future. A further difficulty was that neither the CARAPAX Centre nor the Village des Tortues consider *T. h. boettgeri* to be a high priority in their breeding programmes (the priority for the Village des Tortues is French and Corsican *T. h. hermanni*; while for CARAPAX, the priority species are Italian *T. h. hermanni*, *Testudo graeca* from Sardinia, *Testudo marginata* of Sardinian and Tuscan origin, Italian *orbicularis* and Italian coastal *Caretta caretta*).

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPATRIATION

The first decision made was to bring to the CARAPAX Centre, after a period of quarantine, all confiscated *T. h. boettgeri* which had been sent to SOPTOM by the French and Belgian authorities. They were kept at the CARAPAX Centre in quarantine for at least a further month, for the Centre is more comprehensively equipped and about forty times the size, with about ten times the number of enclosures, of its French sister organization. The tortoises had all originated from southern Yugoslavia (Macedonia). The transfer of 177 animals by CARAPAX from SOPTOM in May 1991 faced a further difficulty because the original Belgian CITES papers had been lost at the French centre, and the veterinary papers were not the official ones because many of the animals sent from Belgium were missing. The repatriation had therefore to be delayed for several months, firstly in order to obtain duplicate CITES papers from Belgium, and secondly because the temperatures of summer were too high.

At the same time, another group of *T. h. boettgeri* at the CARAPAX Centre was also selected for repatriation to Greece. The chosen animals were clearly of Macedonian origin; they were in good health, not too old and were more than 50 millimetres in length. The animals had not been mixed with other tortoises or reptiles, and also had appeared to have readapted to the Mediterranean climate after at least a year's stay at the CARAPAX Centre.

A third group of *T. h. boettgeri*, donated to the CARAPAX Centre by people in Italy, could not be repatriated because the Italian CITES authorities had not been able to make a certificate within a month.

A fourth group of *T. h. boettgeri* came from the Netherlands. All were baby tortoises, hybrids or specimens reared in captivity, and had not therefore adapted to the Mediterranean climate. They also had not been through a period of quarantine. The tortoises were put into quarantine at the CARAPAX Centre and will be kept for exhibition, observation and for purposes of training and instruction. Animals that showed the morphology of southern Greek and island populations were also separated in a fenced-off area in the CARAPAX Centre. It was thus the newly and illegally imported, and therefore still wild, *T. h. boettgeri* from northern Greece and southern Yugoslavia that CARAPAX repatriated to Greece.

It has to be said here that one of those responsible for the Netherlands, a member of the Scientific Committee of CITES, suggested that all these animals should simply be destroyed, presumably on the basis that their origin was unknown. This proposal was regrettable, for it completely discounted the work of the chelonian centres and perhaps draws attention to the substantial background of experience required to be able to recognise the differences in the morphology of the northern, southern, western and island forms of *T. h. boettgeri*, the geographical varieties of *T. h. hermanni*, and the appearance of hybrids and captive-bred animals. The Dutch authorities unfortunately failed to appreciate or were not in a position to be able to acknowledge the expertise available to them of certain specialists, some with over 20 years of experience in tortoise ecological research, especially in Greece, but also in France and Italy. One might consider this to be lamentable, especially since one of the specialists (Dr. R. Willemsens) happens to be Dutch, and had offered his services as an adviser.

It can be recorded here that the attitude of the Greek authorities was quite different. They were found to be polite and cooperative while arrangements were being made for the repatriation.

DEPARTURE OF THE ANIMALS

With the agreement of the Greek authorities, the Italian WWF and the extremely helpful Olympic Airways, the tortoises were finally dispatched on 25 September from Rome to Athens and then on to Thessaloniki. The animals were accompanied by three people from CARAPAX and WWF. Despite all this care and attention, so much time was lost, from 10.30 to 16.30 h, by the authorities at Rome's Fiumicino Airport (customs and CITES representatives, who were absent) that the animals missed the departure of the flight at 15.30 h, causing the Greek authorities and Forestry Department to wait to no avail. Olympic Airways made all the arrangements for postponing the whole operation for 24 hours. The animals finally arrived at Thessaloniki on Friday 26 September at around midnight when, not surprisingly at this late hour, nothing further could be done. The airport services in Thessaloniki unfortunately do not work on Saturday and the message to postpone the operation for 24 hours had been misunderstood at the Greek end. Their interpretation was that everything had been cancelled! By pure chance, the CARAPAX representatives came into contact with members of the Greek Ornithological Society, who alerted the Greek Customs and a veterinary service. All those responsible were kind enough to return to the Airport from their homes and thanks to the personal intervention of the head of the Forestry Department for the prefecture of Thessaloniki (Macedonia), Mr Alexandros Karnadas, transport of this unusual consignment was reorganised.

RELEASE OF THE ANIMALS

The transportation of the animals in Greece proceeded very smoothly and the CARAPAX Centre is most grateful to the Forestry Department for carrying out this service so effectively.

Several areas were chosen for the release of the tortoises. All are protected and close to areas covered by the Ramsar Convention. None is of touristic or agricultural interest. For these two reasons, and because of the negative attitude of the local inhabitants experienced by British biologists after earlier research and conservation proposals in the area, the first idea to set the animals free at Katarini-Alyki was dropped. The areas finally chosen were almost without any human settlement and included an ideal dune system (e.g. Epanomi) or half-open maquis, and scattered oakwood vegetation.

As an experimental operation, the tortoises were released in groups of 20-50. Each was measured and marked, and details included in a register to provide the opportunity for follow-up. A total of 275 animals were released in the following places within the vicinity of Thessaloniki:-

1. Epanomi peninsula (30 km S. of Thessaloniki): 48 tortoises.
2. Area between Ossa and Krioneri, north of Koronia Lake (38 km N.E. of Thessaloniki) in five different places: 163 tortoises.
3. Hortiatis, south of Koronia Lake, at Triadi (16 km E.S.E. of Thessaloniki): 36 tortoises.
4. Private controlled land near Poligiris, Halkidiki (56 km S.E. of Thessaloniki): 28 tortoises.

RANA and CARAPAX would like to take this opportunity to express their gratitude to Mr Gregory Tsunis, Greek colleagues with the Greek Ornithological Society, especially Mr Gareth Trewartha, Stella Dimitriado and Aristoteles. Thanks are also due to staff of the Thessaloniki Forestry Department, especially Mr Alexandros Karnadas (Head of the Department), Mr Panaiotis Kalabalikis, the Greek Ministry of Agriculture, especially Messrs Petamides and Handrinos, and to Mrs Ana Manolopouoy.

In conclusion, CARAPAX staff and their colleagues hope that this operation will play a part in convincing the public that they should not buy illegally imported tortoises. They also hope that the operation demonstrates that good international cooperation between Ministries and NGOs is not only possible, but above all, necessary. In particular, they aim to bring about a halt in illegal trade in herpetofauna which is mainly concentrated in those countries apparently concerned with nature preservation.

An earlier version of this report has been sent to the authorities involved with this repatriation as well as to the Environment Division of the Commission of European Communities, Brussels.