

## HELP NEEDED!

### THE PLIGHT OF THE GIANT TORTOISES OF CHANGUU ISLAND, ZANZIBAR

The giant tortoises (*Geochelone gigantea*) of Changuu Island, Zanzibar, are believed to have originated from Aldabra, in the Indian Ocean, in the early 19th century. Until recently Changuu remained a safe haven for these magnificent, yet vulnerable, tortoises. In the 1950's it was reported that there were 200 tortoises on the island. However, in 1990 the population had dropped to 50. In 1996 Mr. Steve Tolan drew attention to the threats that faced this unique group of animals. A survey later in the year by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), together with Professor John Cooper, revealed that only nine adults remained on the island. It appeared that tortoises were being stolen, probably to supply the international trade, and that any adults would remain by the millennium, seemed extremely unlikely.

At the time of the 1996 survey there were also 84 baby tortoises on Changuu but these were kept in poor conditions in a locked shed. Originally babies were released on the island when they reached five years of age, but the likelihood of them being stolen meant that they now had to remain in the shed, with dwindling numbers of hatchlings joining them each year. It was disturbing news that the 1996 survey revealed no small to medium-sized tortoises, even though each year a new batch had been released from the rearing shed.

Something had to be done quickly to ensure that the giant tortoises would survive, so WSPA, in conjunction with the Zanzibar Tourist Corporation and with the assistance of Drs. Meredith Kennedy and Dennis Doughty, both veterinarians, developed a rescue plan. In September 1996 all 84 babies were relocated to a fenced compound in the grounds of Livingstone House on the main Zanzibar Island, while the nine remaining adults were numbered and closely monitored on Changuu.

Disaster struck soon after, when in November 1996 over half the youngsters were stolen from their compound on Zanzibar, and two adults (a male and a female) disappeared from Changuu. However, this setback was turned to advantage. A 500 US dollar reward prompted an informer to come forward and as a result, a man was arrested in Dar es Salaam. Nine adult tortoises were seized (including the two recently marked ones stolen from Changuu), and all were returned to Zanzibar. Further information led the authorities to another person who was found to be in possession of 13 adults, 8 mid-age tortoises and 30 youngsters.

These seizures have quadrupled the Zanzibar population of adult giant tortoises and show what can be achieved by dedicated effort in a relatively short space of time. However, stronger security measures, better vigilance, veterinary tests on confiscated animals and funding for the larger food bill, are all essential to increase the population on Changuu and to provide the tortoises with a secure future. We are therefore seeking the assistance of herpetologists, naturalists, and other concerned persons in order to provide these. Cheques should be made payable to the "Changuu Tortoise Appeal" and sent to the address below. Information about the appeal and its achievements will be published in herpetological and conservation journals.

JOHN E. COOPER

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Changuu Tortoise Appeal

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