

## THE GIANT TORTOISES OF CHANGUU, ZANZIBAR – AN UPDATE

A recent visit to Zanzibar by a group from Britain has permitted health monitoring to be carried out on the giant tortoises (*Geochelone gigantea*) of Changuu Island. The team, which was led by Professor John E Cooper, included two veterinary students, Sarah Hewitt and Isobel McBurney, and a biologist, Janet Kirk, as well as Muhammed Ayoub Haji, Director of Zala Park, and representatives from other organisations in Zanzibar and Tanzania. Some of the costs of the visit were covered by a grant from the British Chelonia Group (BCG) and donations from individual herpetologists in UK and elsewhere.

Tortoises at liberty on Changuu and in isolation on the main island of Zanzibar were examined clinically and samples were taken for laboratory examination. Analysis of findings is still in progress but preliminary results make it likely that most of the animals on Zanzibar will be able to be moved to Changuu in the near future, making way for, other, confiscated giant tortoises to be brought across from the mainland of East Africa. At present there are 17 adult animals and 27 hatchlings on Changuu and 50 immatures in isolation on Zanzibar.

The health monitoring programme is complementary to other work that has been carried out on Changuu since the plight of its giant tortoises was first highlighted in 1996. The World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), through its Regional Manager for Africa, Mr Mike Pugh, has spearheaded and funded the establishment of secure areas on Changuu, including a “Nursery” where young tortoises will be kept and reared after hatching. WSPA has also been active in promoting educational and publicity measures. The SIT (School for International Training) has played a key part in the veterinary care of the giant tortoises, this being organised formerly by Dr Meredith Kennedy and now by Dr Dennis Doughty. The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Sokoine University of Agriculture has supplemented this with laboratory investigations under the direction of Professor Gabriel Mbassa. The whole programme has been co-ordinated by Mr Andrew Katema of the Zanzibar Tourist Corporation.

Although the giant tortoises are not an endangered species, their protection and conservation on Changuu is of importance. The population is a small, isolated, one with an excellent history of breeding. It offers opportunities for scientific study and has already helped in the development and refinement of health monitoring techniques for chelonians. Last, but not least, the giant tortoises of Changuu play a key part in tourism as well as providing an ideal focus for Zanzibar’s conservation education programme.

The future for this isolated population of giant tortoises appears to be considerably brighter than it was in 1996 but much remains to be done if these animals are not to continue to be poached or to be at risk from introduced diseases. At the same time as measures to counter these threats are underway, deliberations are planned as to whether Changuu Island might be developed as a centre for wildlife research, such an initiative running in parallel with the ongoing tourism programme. Despite its small size (the island is less than a kilometre in length), Changuu has a remarkably rich fauna and flora; however, most of these plants and animals, some indigenous and some introduced, have not been censused or studied. The establishment and development of a research centre would facilitate such work and would provide opportunities for fruitful collaboration between expatriate and Tanzanian scientists and students. The proposal is an ambitious one that will need approval by the authorities and time to implement; it could, however, mark a new and exciting era in the history of Changuu Island.

JOHN E COOPER