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## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

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### CAPTIVE-BREEDING OF EUROPEAN TORTOISES: BACKGROUND AND POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

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THE *BHS* actively encourages the captive breeding of European tortoises, for which there is a substantial demand. I use the word 'European' as almost all those bred are of European stock as opposed to being of north African origin as in the case of *graeca graeca*. The sale of tortoises is legal provided these tortoises used for breeding are themselves captive-bred, i.e. the progeny offered for sale must be F2 generation at least.

I have recently referred in the *Natterjack* (issue 82, November 2001) to the key role of Monica Green in the protection of Mediterranean tortoises. I use the word 'Mediterranean' here as the bulk of the tortoises imported into the UK after the Second World War came from north Africa, mainly Morocco. It was as a result of very extensive pioneering work undertaken by Monica, ably assisted by her late father, that the Government initially restricted and then totally banned the import of wild Mediterranean tortoises in 1984. *This was a major step forward in protecting wild populations of tortoises from collection for the pet trade.*

It is important that younger readers realise that there was a huge trade in wild tortoises, which were imported into this country in disgusting conditions some 25-50 piled on top of each other in wicker baskets. Many arrived dead. The survivors were then distributed to pet shops before being sold on to the public.

As a school boy I wrote regularly for the monthly magazine *The Aquarist*. In the April issue each year there was an advertisement by a Liverpool importer, Joe Grassby, which read 'Tortoises - first 10,000 due April 1<sup>st</sup>'. Many more 10,000 lots were imported by this and other dealers each year and tortoises were available *en masse* in all the pet shops in the land. At this time they cost half a crown (equal to 12.5p today). I

would go into my local pet shop after school and tell the owner that there were several dead tortoises in the window (one window was completely given over to a 'pile' of tortoises) and he would reply 'Don't worry, nobody will notice'.

Because the pet shops knew little or nothing about the proper care of the tortoises the purchasers went off ignorant, or worse misinformed, about their care.

We have moved on, thankfully, from these days but we still need to keep a stringent check that tortoises are not being taken from the wild as tortoises remain very desirable. It is fashionable to say that habitat loss is now *the* problem, but illegal collection of tortoises, which is difficult to quantify, continues. The population dynamics of tortoises — a potentially long adult lifespan, low reproductive rate as a result of advanced age at commencement of breeding and comparatively small and vulnerable egg clutches — leave them particularly threatened by the collection of larger individuals, the natural focus of the illegal trade.

Since I became President of the Society it has come to my attention that there is a substantial illegal trade in the UK of tortoises smuggled from the wild. In part this trade has continued due to the sheer demand for tortoises — which captive-breeding has been unable to meet. Furthermore, as a result of the 1984 legislation, there have been virtually no large legal tortoises for people to acquire. The illegal trade is fuelled by the comparatively high prices paid for tortoises — especially adults. *Hence, put simply, every captive-bred tortoise passed on to people who want to keep one reduces the chance of one being taken from the wild.*

It is important to appreciate that there *can be* a problem with captive-breeding farms in countries where tortoises or other 'farmed' reptiles occur naturally. This is that much of the stock (both

breeding and youngsters for sale) *may be* illegally taken from the wild. Only the most rigorous inspections by well-qualified and dedicated officers in the countries concerned will minimise this.

This was one reason why during my eight years involved in crocodylian conservation in India as a Chief Technical Adviser to the Government of India, and although in very many ways India was an ideal location, we took the decision not to authorise crocodile farming as it would in practice be virtually impossible to police, and would be bound to destroy, or at the very least seriously damage, the very resource we were trying to conserve.

Some years ago I brought a classic case of alleged reptile farming to the attention of the DOE (as it was called then). This was the so-called 'farming' of Royal Pythons in West Africa. I was in touch with people locally including one of those involved in the 'farming', so knew precisely what was going on. Gravid female royals were collected and 'thrown onto an island'. In due course the young pythons were collected and exported to Europe and the US and *then* the spent females were sold in the food market. So the so-called 'farming' of Royal Pythons was not only taking the wild egg production, but was destroying the resource, by, after egg-laying, using the females as food!

Coincidentally, while I was writing this article I was telephoned by a dealer from an Eastern European country now resident in the UK. He told me that he is returning home to breed tortoises. He also told me where he would collect both his 'breeding' stock and young ones for sale. 'You get them in the fields there and put them as [= make it appear that] you bred them. Chip them and all is OK'. I will, of course, be monitoring this situation and will report further when appropriate in the *Natterjack*.

As breeders of all livestock will know there is a growing awareness in the population of a) the advantages of captive-bred animals, and b) that animals should no longer be taken from the wild. So acquiring a young, as opposed to an adult, tortoise can be presented in a positive light. Obtaining captive-bred stock direct from breeders



An adult male Margined Tortoise - note the flared posterior marginals. This tortoise reaches a large size (up to about 30 cm shell length and a weight of up to 3 kg) and adults are greatly elongated. Photograph by author.

has been given a tremendous boost by a growing public perception which is anti-trade and anti-pet shops in particular. Undoubtedly this sentiment has developed as a result of the conduct of less responsible outlets combined with the failure of many councils to monitor pet shops properly.

It is for *conservation* reasons that I have been keen to promote the captive-breeding of tortoises. The idea being that the public would a) get a captive-bred tortoise, and b) obtain the young tortoise - NOT as a hatchling, but at an appropriate age (see below) - *direct from the breeder* hence cutting out the trade. I breed some *hermanni* and (*graeca*) *ibera* myself to assist this process.

#### At what age should captive-bred tortoises be sold?

From what I hear — and what I have seen at reptile shows — many captive-bred baby tortoises are being sold within a matter of *weeks* of hatching. I consider this practice to be wrong as many of these baby tortoises will not survive in inexperienced hands. It is crucial to appreciate that 'tortoise people' are rarely herpetologists so we are not discussing a parallel situation to handing over a neonate snake, which is now feeding, to an experienced snake-keeper. Tortoises should be grown on, ideally to an age of about two years, before being offered to the general public. This is the age at which I offer the tortoises which I breed to the general public. I would hope that tortoise breeders would sell their surplus direct to

interested parties exactly as a pedigree cat or dog breeder would do and not offer them to the trade. The age at which they are sold is a matter we should discuss at Council as it is important that the BHS has a stated policy on such matters. Since, due to Monica's efforts, the Society is seen to have played a key role in having European tortoise imports banned — on welfare grounds — we certainly do not want to fall into the trap of supporting the sale of tiny baby tortoises which

then die with their new owners. That would not be progress.

In a recent article in the *Daily Telegraph* Jill Martin of the Tortoise Trust is quoted as saying that new tortoise owners should aim to buy one about two years old, which I am in agreement with. Once again members, especially tortoise breeding members, should make known their own views, either through the *Natterjack* or by writing to me.

