



Report

FIRST HATCHLINGS FOUND AT MONTSANT SINCE THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD

A total of 42 male, female and juvenile Mediterranean tortoises were released at the Serra del Montsant Natural Park in spring 2006. This contingent formed part of a project run by the Catalan Department of Environmental Affairs in collaboration with CRARC, which pursues the restoration of the species in this protected area.

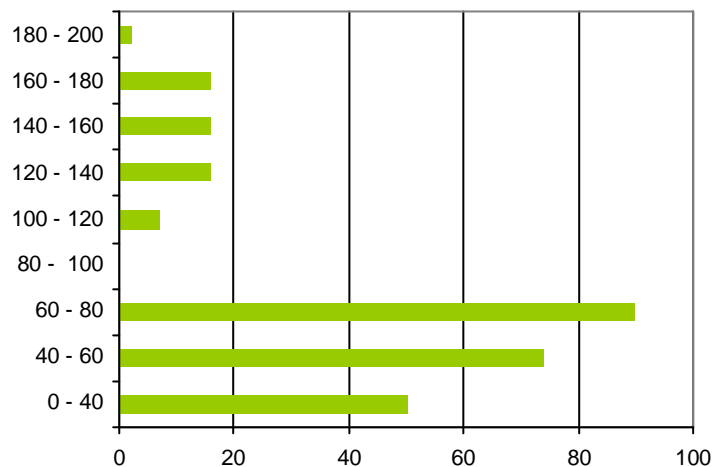
Half a year later the population has increased in numbers. On October 9th, park officials cleaning the forest spotted 4 hatchlings undoubtedly born after the September rains. Autumn showers had softened the soil where the eggs laid by the females released in April had been incubating for two and a half months. This success demonstrates the suitability of the chosen area and is a boost for the prospects of this project.

The new-born tortoises barely measure 30 mm and are the first to be born at Montsant since the Neolithic period. Fossil remains found inside the Filador Cave in the village of Margalef del Montsant reveal that the species had inhabited the area in prehistoric times.

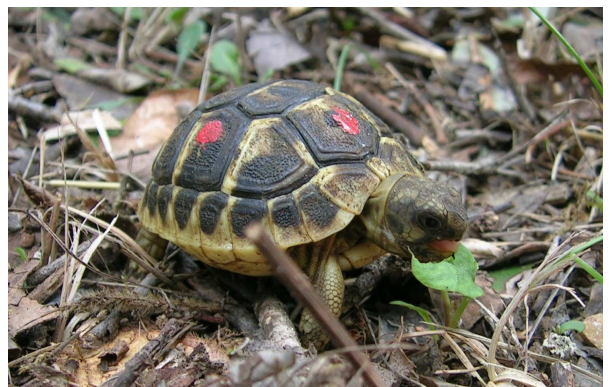
All evidence seems to indicate, therefore, that the project to reintroduce Mediterranean tortoises at Montsant Natural Park is well underway.

Disregarding tortoises which will be born each season, with every release the project aims at establishing an ideal colony formed mainly by newborns and juveniles. Bibliographic references regarding populations with a good number of specimens and healthy generational replacements, establish the following percentages of juveniles: 47% in Rumania, from 22 % to 60% in Greece and 64% in Corsica (COSTA et al. 2005).

Keeping similar proportions in the structure of the colony and fostering the introduction of juveniles, (measuring 60 to 100 mm. -see chart-) are, therefore, two crucial goals to aim for. Currently, the percentage of newborns released in the park is 72 %. To this figure we must add the small amount of hatchlings born this year.



Carapaces in all hatchlings released at Montsant were clearly marked for future identification.



Police operation report

Last October a theft of protected species worth over €18.000 was favourably resolved. The robbery took place on July 16th 2006, when members of a gang connected with the illegal trade in protected species, -among other criminal activities-, forced their way into the Catalanian Reptile and Amphibian Rehabilitation Centre (CRARC). All alarm systems dodged, they took a total of 15 tortoises (5 giant African tortoises *Centrochelys sulcata*, 2 South American red-footed tortoises *Chelonoidis carbonaria*, 2 leopard tortoises *Stigmochelys pardalis*, 5 snapping turtles *Chelydra serpentina* and an African crocodile *Osteolaemus tetraspis*). All of the specimens were unique in size or rare within the legal pet trade. The reptile-enthusiast thieves were well aware of black market prices for endangered species, that's why Florida turtles or iguanas were not their target.

After the robbery the loot was immediately put on sale in the surroundings of Barcelona. Pet shops were alerted to the news and many showed their concern and offered to collaborate with CRARC within the law.

A month later, two men attempted to steal local tortoises whilst on a daylight family visit to CRARC's installations. Fortunately, they were spotted by staff members. The local police was immediately called, and the two men arrested.

There seemed to be a link between the two robberies. After three months of investigation and a tremendous collaborative effort between the local police, CRARC, veterinarians, other institutions, reptile owners and pet shops, the suspect list was narrowed down and a man in possession of an illegal crocodile in his garden was arrested. It turned out to be one of the stolen animals.

The Police force questioned this man, whose declaration uncovered what seemed to be an established illegal traffic network. From that moment on, the stolen animals started to be recovered.

The suspects were put under such pressure by the police that they were driven to dump the stolen animals (the last giant tortoises) at the vicinity of the village of Bigues i Riells, in a desperate attempt to evade their guilt. The exotic tortoises (some weighing up to 30 kg) wandered the hills at the beginning of autumn with a high risk of hypothermia. Some were recaptured when officials of the Catalan Department of Environmental Affairs



raided the area. Others were collected by people who came

Two such day trippers handed tortoises to the local police after the news was broadcast both locally and nationally. This is how most of the stolen animals were eventually recovered. There is, however, a male leopard tortoise still missing.

All the chelonians had symptoms of malnourishment, tiredness, dehydration, and even signs of having been mistreated (cracked carapaces, scratches, etc) what seems to indicate that they were submitted to stressful and harmful situations.

Most of the stolen specimens were species in danger of extinction and we should all congratulate ourselves for their recovery. However, it has become evident that illegal trafficking still occurs and so much money revolves around it, it is no wonder why people with no scruples or ethical principles put their freedom at risk with their criminal acts and contribute to the process of the animal's extinction.

To those involved (Masquefa's and Bigues i Riells' Local Police, Mossos d'Esquadra's Regional Environmental Unit Force, Mossos d'Esquadra



Officials at Igualada's Police Station) our most sincere gratitude. Special mention to the Rural Agents and the Catalonia's Fauna Patrol for their interest and support.

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