Highlighting Support for the Madagascar Big-headed Turtle Integrated Conservation Program

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Once ranging across most of Madagascar's west-flowing rivers and lakes, the Critically Endangered Madagascar Big-headed Turtle (*Erymnochelys madagascariensis*), or "*Rere*," is now restricted to eight watersheds, with only 7.6% of the species' historical range currently supporting stable populations. Populations have declined precipitously due to loss of wetlands and consumption of the turtle's meat and eggs by local communities. Rising to the challenge of preventing this species from slipping over the brink, Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust (now Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust), in collaboration with Conservation International and Madagascar National Parks, began a conservation initiative in 1998. The ultimate goal of this recovery effort was to ensure that at least one healthy population survived within each of the eight watersheds. Conservation activities have focused on four key sites, with four priority activities at each site: 1) research on the species' distribution, biology, ecology, genetics, and major threats; 2) intensive population management, including captive breeding, population restoration through release and post-release survival monitoring of headstarted juveniles and translocated hatchlings, and protection of wild nests; 3) education and capacity building of local communities to improve awareness of the species' importance and to facilitate the legal transfer of resource management to these communities so that they can protect and manage *Rere* wetlands; and 4) promotion of official national protection of important wetlands.

Field team leader Juliette Velosoa (center) with Tsibangoe (left) and Namotoa Charles (right), proudly display *Rere* hatchlings from protected nests at Lake Ambondrobe. PHOTO CREDIT: PETER CRANSWICK.

Highly positive results of these activities have been achieved at all four sites. For example, three official New Protected Areas (NPAs) that support important populations have been established, including an NPA at Lake Ambondrobe, which is the most important site for *Rere* in Madagascar. The captive-breeding program has produced 114 hatchlings to date that have been released at various ages in Lake Ravelobe in Ankarafantsika National Park, with similar releases also occurring for headstarted young collected from wild nests. Hatchlings from wild nests are also being translocated to areas where populations need reinforcement, and all groups are being regularly monitored to determine the best possible release strategy. Survival of all age groups has been high, and the populations at Lakes Ankomakoma and Ambondrobe have increased significantly. Additionally, local people at two lakes have protected nests that have produced more than five thousand hatchlings. Community Associations have been created at four sites to protect turtles and habitat, with the long-term goal of having communities sustainably manage viable turtle populations within each of the eight main watersheds.

This program provides an excellent global model for a successful *in situ* program that integrates captive breeding, wild population management and restoration, and most importantly, community-led conservation and resource management. The Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) has been a proud and integral partner in this endeavor by providing regular support in the form of eight grants since 2008, totaling nearly $40,000. This project is just an example of the many conservation successes that the TCF has been integral in supporting since 2003. For more information about the TCF and grant application procedures, visit: www.TurtleConservationFund.org.