



Promoting Protection for Pancake Tortoises: Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF)

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The Pancake Tortoises (*Malacochersus tornieri*) of East Africa are wonderfully unique in appearance, with their flattened and soft expandable shells that enable them to wedge into narrow rock crevices for protection. Rocky outcrops containing suitable crevices are scattered across the savannahs of Kenya, Tanzania, and very northern Zambia. With an abundance of edible vegetation surrounding their habitats, these tortoises should theoretically lead a secure existence. However, their appeal as pets has rendered them over-collected, with many populations decimated by poachers. This, compounded with destruction of the habitat critical to their survival, has caused serious population declines. Habitat destruction includes land development for agriculture, charcoal production, and rock extraction for both local and industrial purposes; additionally, poachers frequently destroy rock crevices to extract hiding tortoises. As a result, populations of Pancake Tortoises have decreased dramatically over the years and the species was assessed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN, and uplisted to CITES Appendix I in 2019. Clearly, we need to promote protection and focused conservation action to save this charismatic species from extinction in the wild.

To this end, from 2006 through 2019 TCF has provided about \$22,500 in support of 6 projects on Pancake Tortoises conducted by 8 conservationists, including 4 native Kenyans and Tanzanians. Collectively, these projects have focused on the status and biology of the tortoises, as well as on educational and ecotourism activities in communities that surround key populations. Educational programming provides a better understanding of threats, and ecotourism creates a potential economic benefit to have tortoise populations persist. Unfortunately, most local safari guides do not seem to be aware of



Reginald Mwaya, one of several dedicated TCF grantees working on Pancake Tortoises, here with a juvenile in Tanzania. PHOTO BY RUSSELL MITTERMEIER.

these tortoises, thereby not promoting them for ecotourism. Instead, as a monotypic genus and a very appealing animal, the Pancake Tortoise should prove an important species for the growing pastime of Turtle-Watching and Turtle Life-Listing. So far, TCF-supported projects have included: 1) population genetics to investigate phylogeography, 2) population status surveys to estimate persistence, location, and size, 3) reproductive ecology, and 4) an assessment of efforts to curtail live trade. All these initiatives are essential in forming effective conservation programs and it is our hope that promoting and

pursuing protection for Pancake Tortoises will lead to stabilization of their populations and eventual recovery.

From 2002 through 2020, TCF has funded 296 of 833 submitted proposals, for total disbursements of about \$1.26 million. Average awards were \$4,276, with projects conducted in 59 nations.

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