



# Supporting the Rediscovery of the Nubian Flapshell Turtle: Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) and Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund (MBZ)

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Last year, the Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) and the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund (MBZ) each marked significant milestones in reaching the one-million-dollar mark for dedicated turtle and tortoise conservation funding. Both funds have continued their loyalty to turtle and tortoise conservation support over the past year. One of the recent projects supported by both funds has had some very welcome results: the rediscovery of a nearly extinct species, the Nubian Flapshell Turtle (*Cyclanorbis elegans*), along the White Nile in South Sudan.

This large softshell species has been assessed by the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group to be one of the most critically endangered turtles in the world, literally teetering on the brink of extinction. There have been no sightings of any animals in the wild for several decades, and the only known captive died in a private U.S. collection in 2012. The historic distribution of the species was in the Sub-Saharan Sahel region, in a series of apparently disjunct populations extending from Ghana to South Sudan, but with no current evidence of persistence in most of its range. Several focused field surveys over the years by Luca Luiselli and associates in Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria, and supported by TCF and MBZ, as well as others, have provided discouraging results—no Nubian Flapshell Turtles were discovered.

Raising hopes of rediscovery, support from TCF to Patrick Baker in 2014 resulted in preliminary interview reports of the possible continued presence of *C. elegans* in South Sudan, however, no animals were found (though descriptions by local fishermen were quite precise). Further support to pursue these



*A live but previously damaged Nubian Flapshell Turtle captured in September 2018 in the White Nile, South Sudan, about to be butchered for local consumption. PHOTO CREDIT: GIFT SIMON DEMAYA*

preliminary reports, as well as to collect data on the distribution and abundance of other turtle species in South Sudan, was provided to Luiselli and colleagues Gift Simon Demaya and Tomas Diagne by both TCF and MBZ again in 2017. The local South Sudan team also included John Sebit Benansio and Thomas Francis Lado from the University of Juba.

Field work by this team in South Sudan has now confirmed the continued survival of a small population of *C. elegans* in the White Nile (and records of 9 other turtle and tortoise species). The hopeful news of rediscovery of this nearly extinct species must be tempered by the fact that this remnant population is under severe threat from local exploitation and consumption as well as habitat loss. Continued exploitation of this population is sure to continue unless new protective measures are initiated.

The creation of a novel protected area for the section of the White Nile in which they inhabit is being considered in conjunction with the Government of South Sudan and with the support of Rainforest Trust. Furthermore, Luiselli is pursuing additional survey work to establish size and density of the population and to document habitat

preferences. Establishing a captive breeding program in South Sudan and perhaps elsewhere also needs to be considered.

## ABOUT THE TCF AND MBZ:

The TCF was founded in 2002 by the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, Turtle Survival Alliance, and Conservation International. Through August 2018 it has provided funding for 250 projects focused on turtles and tortoises, at an average of \$4,352 per project, for a total disbursement of \$1,088,000.

The MBZ was founded in 2008 by His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and through September 2018 has provided a total of about \$17.5 million in grants to 1800+ projects. Of these, 111 projects have focused on turtles and tortoises, at an average of \$9,910 per project, for a total turtle disbursement of \$1,100,000.

Both TCF and MBZ greatly value the support of the turtle conservation community in our efforts and we are honored and pleased to be able to provide as much support as we do for so many of the critically important front-line and on-the-ground efforts on behalf of global turtle conservation. By continuing to expand and grow our capacity for providing support, we hope to make an increasingly important impact on all turtle conservation efforts. Please consider submitting your grant proposals to us at [www.turtleconservationfund.org](http://www.turtleconservationfund.org) and [www.speciesconservation.org](http://www.speciesconservation.org).

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