

## PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Date: April 8, 2011

### **Insatiable Appetites Drive Madagascar's Tortoises to Extinction**

Antananarivo, Madagascar — April 8, 2011—Despite being one of the most culturally significant and iconic species in Madagascar, the Radiated Tortoise (*Astrochelys radiata*) is being catapulted to extinction because it is a source of food for local people and a highly-prized commodity for poachers. Surveys conducted in March by the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA), The Orianne Society, and Nautilus Ecology showed that unsustainable harvesting, collection for the illegal pet trade, and habitat loss will continue to spell doom for this species unless a unified and holistic approach to ensure its survival is taken.

The Radiated Tortoise was once protected by a cultural taboo that prevented local tribes from eating them. However, increased development within the range of the species has caused an influx of people from tortoise eating tribes. “A cataclysmic shift has occurred,” says Dr. Christina Castellano, Director of Turtle Conservation at The Orianne Society. “Traditionally, tortoise meat was served on special occasions, but now it is eaten on a daily basis. Hundreds of pieces of discarded tortoise shells litter the sidewalks in some communities. This staggering level of consumption is not sustainable.”

This large and slow-moving tortoise is literally defenseless against poachers, as are the communities that want to continue to uphold the taboo. A poaching network, often referred to as the “Tortoise Mafia,” makes this nearly impossible. “The poaching is ongoing and relentless with poachers sweeping entire areas, clearing them of tortoises,” says Ryan Walker, Biologist at Nautilus Ecology. He goes on to say that “armed poaching gangs are sometimes up to 100 strong, and, as a consequence, we are witnessing the systemic extermination of this species.”

The appetite for this creature extends far beyond the shores of the island. This stunningly beautiful tortoise is coveted by animal collectors in the United States, Europe, and Asia. A recent report by TRAFFIC, an organization that monitors trade in endangered wildlife, indicated that the Radiated Tortoise is now the most abundant turtle seen in the illegal pet trade in Asian markets. According to Rick

Hudson, President of TSA, “Thousands of small tortoises are being smuggled out of Madagascar straight into Bangkok and then on to larger Asian cities. Removing both adults and juveniles from the wild leaves populations with little potential for recovery. Enforcement is the key to saving this species, but unfortunately the infrastructure is not currently in place to make this happen. The situation is desperate, and we don’t have much time left.”

“If we do not take immediate action to conserve the Radiated Tortoise, we may lose one of the most beautiful and irreplaceable species in the world,” says Dr. Herilala Randriamahazo, Madagascar Tortoise Conservation Coordinator for the TSA. “A vital step to ensuring its survival is to focus our efforts on the remaining healthy populations that are in close proximity to communities with a strong tradition of tortoise protection.”

###

Additional Notes to the Editor:

1. The four species of tortoises native to Madagascar are all critically endangered and threatened with extinct in the near future.
2. The Oriane Society is a U.S. based conservation organization dedicated to the long-term survival of reptiles and amphibians in the wild.
3. The Turtle Survival Alliance is an action oriented global partnership that is committed to zero turtle extinctions in the 21st century.
4. Nautilus Ecology is a consortium of freelance marine and terrestrial ecologists and environmental scientists that aim to bridge the gap between active biodiversity conservation, research, and commercial environmental consultancy.

## **Contact Information**

**Dr. Herilala Randriamahazo, Madagascar Tortoise Conservation  
Coordinator**

Turtle Survival Alliance/Madagascar

Phone: +261 0331187993

Phone: +261 0343776701

Email: [herilala@turtlesurvival.org](mailto:herilala@turtlesurvival.org)

**Heather Lowe, MS**

Turtle Survival Alliance

1989 Colonial Parkway

Fort Worth, TX 76110

Phone: 817-759-7262 (work)

Fax: 817-759-7501

Email: [hlowe@turtlesurvival.org](mailto:hlowe@turtlesurvival.org)

**Teri Aurora, Communications**

The Orianne Society

579 Highway 441 South

Clayton, GA 30525

Phone: 706-212-0112 (work); 239-410-8054 (home)

Fax: 706-212-0113

Email: [taurora@oriannesociety.org](mailto:taurora@oriannesociety.org)