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ORGANIZATIONS & THE WEB

Activities of the Gea Chelonia Foundation

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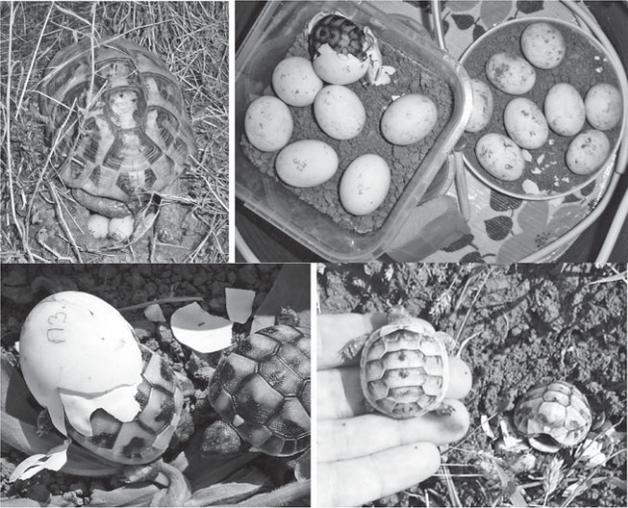
Founded in April 2007, the Gea Chelonia Foundation (GCF) is the first and only nongovernmental organization in Bulgaria dedicated to chelonian conservation, focused primarily on tortoise research and protection.

The main goals of the GCF are to bring tortoise research and conservation measures in Bulgaria up to an adequate level, to introduce the experience of and collaborate with the leading organizations and experts worldwide, to facilitate scientific investigations relevant to the conservation of tortoise populations and their habitats, to use the results for creating public awareness, and to undertake programs closely related to advancing knowledge of the conservation biology of Bulgarian chelonians.

Ivo Ivanchev has started a sanctuary and specialized in an ex situ Center for land tortoises since 2002. The main activities of the Center are research on the ecology and biology of both native Bulgarian species—*Testudo hermanni boettgeri* and *Testudo graeca ibera*, restoration and stabilization of populations on the territory of Eastern Balkan Range through a reintroduction program of young (captive bred) and confiscated specimens, rescuing specimens from territories that are to be destroyed by human activities; providing medical treatment of sick and injured tortoises, and popularization of the necessity of the protection of both tortoises and their habitats. Great numbers of tortoises go through the Center each year and almost all of them are



Figures 1 and 2. Common view of tortoise habitat destruction from resort construction all over the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. (Photos by Ivo Ivanchev.)



Figures 3–6. Captive breeding program in the Center includes artificial incubation as well as well as incubation in natural nests. (Photos by Ivo Ivanchev.)

reintroduced back into the wild. The Center is situated in Banya village in the district Bourgas, in the middle of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. The location is favorable for these purposes because it is surrounded by a territory where both species of land tortoises still naturally occur.

In 2007, GCF and its Center were officially recognized by the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water and are allowed to operate field actions and research with the legally protected native tortoise species.

In recent decades tortoise abundance in Bulgaria has suffered ubiquitous reduction. Under particular threat is the Black Sea biogeographic region and its habitats. During the last 10–15 years, irreversible damage to biodiversity has been caused by enormous and uncontrolled construction of new resort complexes, golf courses, hotels, wind generators, etc. This is a result of significantly increased investments in resort construction in Bulgaria. Unfortunately, despite the fact that both species of land tortoises are protected to the highest degree possible by legislation, authorities have not provided conditions for real protection. Today, that protection unfortunately only exists on paper. Urgent measures are critical in order to preserve the remaining habitat and its tortoises to prevent total extinction in the coastal region.

During the active tortoise season in 2007–2008, GCF carried out several tortoise rescue campaigns from sites both in the southern and northern areas of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. These areas differ considerably from a biogeographical



Figures 7 and 8. In 2006 the first captive-bred individuals in the Center were released back in the wild. (Photos by Ivo Ivanchev.)



Figures 9 and 10. Rescue actions were promoted by media campaign. (Photos by Ivo Ivanchev.)

prospective, and are being totally destroyed by development. In the rescue campaign, a number of experts, recognized and competent in tortoise conservation and related issues, participated on a voluntary basis. This successful and enthusiastic work laid the basis for the GCF team. As a result, a few hundred specimens of both species (after deworming, careful examination, and marking in the Center) were relocated in safe habitats in areas with protection status.

Until now these actions were financed by winning small project grants from funds such as the Bulgarian Biodiversity Fund (BBF), Rufford Small Grant (RSG), and People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES).

As a registered nonprofit organization, GCF will act as an applicant for conservation projects and will depend mostly on donations by nature and tortoise lovers. Related education, rescue operations, and all activities of the organization and its Center desperately need funding to continue the successful work.

Editor's note

Ivo Ivanchev is from Bulgaria and has been a member of the TFTSG for a short time. He is the founder and manager of Gea Chelonia Foundation, the first NGO in Bulgaria dedicated to chelonian conservation and research. Although the foundation is formally only 1 year old, it is based on a number of years of hard work and it has already achieved recognition and results on a national level, mostly in the conservation of and research about *Testudo hermanni boettgeri* and *Testudo graeca iberica* the terrestrial species naturally found in Bulgaria. The Foundation also runs the only Tortoise Center in the country, situated in the middle of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. You can find more information on their Web site: <http://geachelonia.hit.bg/>. Ivo would appreciate comments, suggestions, and advice in order to update and improve it. Please see the Information Sought section, this issue.