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Contact: Pamela Moyer
(202) 912-1294
p.moyer@conservation.org



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Top 25 Turtles On Death Row

New List Spotlights Most Endangered Turtles And Action Plan to Save Them

Washington, DC, May 15, 2003—The Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) today released its first-ever list of the *World's Top 25 Most Endangered Turtles* to highlight the survival crisis facing the world's tortoises and freshwater turtles and to unveil a **Global Action Plan** to prevent further extinctions. Fully 200 of the 300 living species of tortoises and freshwater turtles are threatened and require conservation action.

The TCF list focuses on 25 species at highest risk and includes endangered and critically endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles, based on the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, as well as general consensus between TCF's three partner organizations—the Center For Applied Biodiversity Science at Conservation International (CABS), The World Conservation Union Species Survival Commission's (IUCN/SSC) Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (TFTSG), and IUCN/SSC Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA).

“Many of the critically endangered species are at great risk of going extinct within the next 20 years—unless we take immediate action,” said Kurt Buhlmann, Conservation International's director for the Center for Applied Biodiversity Science Turtle Program, and executive director for the Turtle Conservation Fund. “The Turtle Conservation Fund is a strategic partnership that combines the strengths of our organizations and will enable us to act quickly to avoid further extinctions and ensure sustainable populations of wild species.”

In Indonesia, for example, the Sulawesi forest turtle is already critically endangered after only being known to science for less than 10 years. The belief that soup and jelly made from the attractive Chinese three-striped box turtle has cancer-curing properties has reduced populations of this species to a few remnant colonies in Northern Vietnam and China.

“With nine of the world's turtle species and subspecies having already become extinct at the hands of modern man, and fully two-thirds of the remaining species under great threat, we have a crisis that needs to be addressed immediately,” said Anders Rhodin, director of the Chelonian Research Foundation, chair of the TCF and co-chair of the TFTSG. “The collaborative efforts of the Turtle Conservation Fund and its alliance partner organizations and quick implementation of an effective conservation action plan can help ensure their long-term survival.”

Turtles are increasingly threatened by human exploitation and development-related pressures. Of particular concern is the unrelenting demand from the Asian food and traditional medicine market with more than half of the continent's 90 species endangered or critically endangered. Tons of live turtles are imported each day to southern China from the Southeast Asia region, with more than 10 million individuals traded per year.

The non-sustainable harvest has decimated natural populations near the consumer source in China and has reached deep into the surrounding Southeast Asian regions and is now even beginning to impact turtles in North America, Africa, Europe and elsewhere.

In many areas, threats include development, habitat destruction and fragmentation, as well as unregulated pet trade collection. Turtles are also affected by other human-caused threats, including invasive alien species, chemical and hormonal pollution, gradual global warming, and various illnesses due to introduced pathogens, such as the upper respiratory tract disease affecting North American desert tortoises.

Species on the Top 25 list cling to survival in small numbers in Asia (12), South Africa (2), Madagascar (3), the Mediterranean (1), Australia (2), South America (2), Mesoamerica (1) and the United States (2).

Twenty-one of the species occur in 11 of the world's 25 biodiversity hotspots, areas which house the greatest number of species yet face the most severe threats. Critical to the turtles' survival will be protection of these hotspots where small populations still remain: Indo-Burma, Sundaland, the Philippines, Wallacea, Succulent Karoo, Cape Floristic Region, Madagascar & Indian Ocean Islands, Mediterranean Basin, Southwestern Australia, Choco-Darien-Western Ecuador, and Mesoamerica.

"Turtles have been around since before many dinosaurs walked the planet and have survived relatively unchanged for about 250 million years," said CI President Russell Mittermeier. "But mankind's actions have brought them to the brink of extinction. It's our responsibility to bring them back." CI believes that effective protection of these 11 hotspots will go a long way towards increasing the survival of 21 of the most endangered turtles.

In order to implement their five-year Global Action Plan, the TCF intends to raise an estimated \$5.6 million. Plans include captive breeding (using trade-confiscated turtles), additional field research, development of country support for trade monitoring, illegal trade confiscations, establishment of rescue centers, sustainable harvest programs, ecologically sound turtle farming (for commercial purposes to lessen pressures on wild populations), relocation and return to countries of origin, public outreach and educational programs, trade regulation enforcement, and identification and establishment of protected areas that take tortoises and freshwater turtles into consideration.

"While the Turtle Conservation Fund plan offers a glimmer of hope to some of the world's most endangered turtles; for some, it is already too late," said Rick Hudson, co-chair of the IUCN Turtle Survival Alliance, and a member of the Steering Committee of the TFTSG. "Unless urgent conservation action is taken, many more species may go the way of 'Lonesome George'," he said, referring to the famous sole surviving Galapagos Abingdon Island tortoise. As the last of his species, George's fate is sealed. He is destined to remain a bachelor for the rest of his days—about another 100 years.

For descriptions and photos of the top 25 endangered turtles, or to request an interview, contact Pamela Moyer at (202) 912-1294.

About the TCF and partner organizations:

The **Turtle Conservation Fund** (TCF) is a partnership initiative of Conservation International-The Center For Applied Biodiversity Science (CI-CABS), IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, and IUCN/SSC Turtle Survival Alliance. Its mission is to ensure that no species of tortoise or freshwater turtle becomes extinct and that sustainable populations of all species persist in the wild, and will be achieved through facilitation and funding of coordinated global turtle conservation initiatives, including strategic partnership alliances and directed conservation action.

Conservation International (CI) is an environmental organization working in more than 30 countries around the globe to protect biodiversity and to demonstrate that human societies can live harmoniously with nature. CI develops scientific, policy and economic solutions to protect threatened natural ecosystems that are rich in biodiversity. Read more about CI at www.conservation.org.

The **Center For Applied Biodiversity Science** (CABS) based at Conservation International, strengthens the ability of CI and other institutions to accurately identify and quickly respond to emerging threats to Earth's biological diversity. CABS brings together leading experts in science and technology to collect and interpret data about biodiversity, to develop strategic plans for conservation and to forge key partnerships in all sectors toward conservation goals. Read more about cabs at <http://www.biodiversityscience.org/>.

The **Species Survival Commission** (SSC) is one of six volunteer commissions of the **World Conservation Union** (IUCN), a union of sovereign states, government agencies and non-governmental organizations. The SSC's mission is to conserve biological diversity by developing and executing programs to save, restore and wisely manage species and their habitats.

The **Turtle Survival Alliance** (TSA), under the auspices of IUCN-SSC, exists to develop and maintain a global network of living tortoises and freshwater turtles with the primary goal of maintaining these chelonian species over the long term to provide maximum future options for the recovery of wild populations. The TSA is comprised of individuals and organizations from 11 countries in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia representing conservation NGOs, private breeders, zoo community, commercial breeders, regional turtle survival centers, university researchers, veterinarians, corporations, government and regulatory agencies and range country biologists. It is a task force initiative of the IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group. Read more about TSA at www.turtlesurvival.org.

IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (TFTSG), under the auspices of IUCN-SSC, is responsible for producing and revising threatened status determinations for all tortoise and freshwater turtle species according to the IUCN Red List criteria. TFTSG has been proactively engaged in population status determinations for CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora) recommendations for regulations for species threatened by international trade.