

Madagascar Big-headed Turtle

Erymnochelys madagascariensis

Reptile

Scientific Name

Erymnochelys madagascariensis

Other Names

Madagascar Sideneck Turtle

Range

Western lowlands of Madagascar

Habitat

Fresh water slow moving rivers, backwaters, lakes and rice paddy fields.

Description

A large turtle with a dark-brown colored shell, long neck, and a distinctively large head. Juveniles have a delicate pattern of fine black lines on the shell that disappear with age.

Average Size

Length: 1.7 feet+

Weight: Estimated at 33 lbs.

Lifespan

In the wild: Unknown

In captivity: Estimated at 25 years

Diet

In the wild: Aquatic invertebrates, mollusks, seeds, leaves, fruit and carrion

In captivity: Aquatic invertebrates and plants

Incubation

Unknown

Sexual Maturity

Females: At a shell length of 9.5 – 12 in.

Males: Unknown

Predators

Carnivores, birds of prey and humans

Population Status

Critically Endangered



Behavior

This turtle occurs in freshwater areas and is diurnal (active in the daytime) and highly aquatic. Venturing onto land solely to lay their eggs, the Madagascar Big-headed Turtle prefers to bask on logs, rocks or banks surrounded by water. As an adult, it is mainly herbivorous, feeding on plants and the fruits, flowers and leaves of plants overhanging the water. Hatchlings and juveniles are predominantly carnivorous, but even the adults have been known to opportunistically feed on small vertebrates or dead animals.

Reproduction and Breeding

In the wild, these turtles nest between September and January (most prevalently October-December) and appear to have a biennial ovarian cycle, with individual females only nesting in alternate years.

After the female lays the spherical to elongate shaped eggs with leathery shells, she covers them with a small amount of soil and heads back to the water. No parental care or protection is provided to the young. Because of this, many hatchlings and juveniles move into smaller rivers and even rice paddy-fields for safety where they grow quickly before returning to larger bodies of water to breed when mature.

Conservation

The Madagascar Big-headed Turtle is one of the most endangered turtles in the world, and is included on the Turtle Conservation Fund's (TCF) top 25 endangered turtles list. It is classified as Critically Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and listed on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which protects them from international trade. IUCN estimates the current population at 10,000 adults.

This species is heavily exploited for food because it is easily caught in nets, fish traps and by hook and line. It is also caught and exported illegally from Madagascar to Asia for the traditional medicine market. Furthermore, land development on Madagascar is a serious threat to this turtle, as it destroys its natural habitats. Clearing forests for agriculture and timber opens up Madagascar's untouched habitat and leads to terrible erosion. Subsequent siltation of rivers and lakes renders the turtles even more susceptible to trapping.



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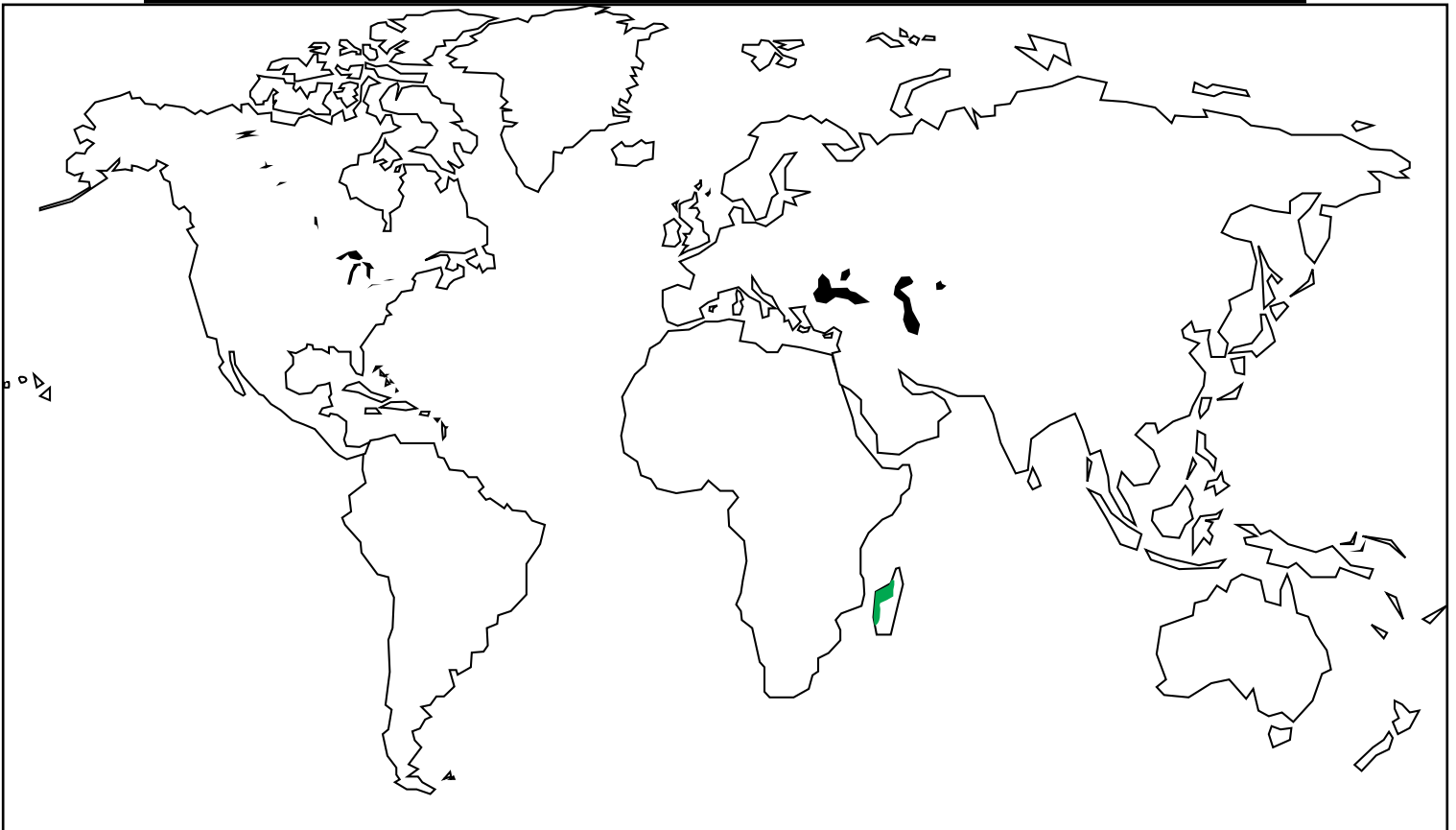
The Turtle Conservation Fund is working on a five year 'Global Action Plan' for this species that includes captive breeding and reintroduction projects, trade monitoring, and establishment of rescue centres, local conservation plans and educational programs. The Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust is also independently involved in the conservation and protection of this species. It is hoped that these measures will provide the protection that this species needs to survive in its natural habitat.

Amazing Facts

This species has a unique adaptation shared by other species in this sub-order: when the head is withdrawn into the shell, the neck bends sideways rather than straight back as in other turtles and tortoises.

The neck of this species is extra-long, and allows the turtle to draw breath at the surface of the water without exposing the rest of the body to potential predators.

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