

**Project number:** 14

**Project applicant:** Wildlife Conservation Society

**Project Name:** Radiated tortoise conservation and forest management through community empowerment in southern Madagascar

**Funds provisionally allocated:** €20,000

### **Summary**

The radiated tortoise, *Geochelone radiata*, is one of southern Madagascar's most enduring – and once ubiquitous – symbols. A flagship species for conservation, this animal plays an important role in the unique spiny forest ecosystem where it originally existed in extremely high densities.

The local people, from the Antandroy and Mahafaly tribes have historically protected the species through "fady" (taboo) against the killing or harming the animal. In spite of this, the tortoises have been extirpated from the northern and eastern edges of its historical range (a range contraction of 25% between 1975 and 2000). Until recently the animal was considered at low risk further into its range in the "deep south" of Madagascar. However, recent studies confirm that the species has suffered recent major losses in important areas once believed to be its strongholds.

In August 2005, an international meeting of the Population and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) group produced an alarming prediction that without immediate and significant intervention, a viable population of radiated tortoises will likely be extirpated from the wild within one tortoise generation, that is, 45 years. By far, the major threat to Radiated tortoises is unsustainable hunting for human consumption in local and national markets. The large and increasing scale of this entirely illegal activity is a relatively new phenomenon.

With support from EAZA, Wildlife Conservation Society will broaden its conservation programme in southern Madagascar throughout the current range of the tortoise. The project will focus on working with local communities who are committed to protect their forests and the tortoises, to offer alternative livelihood activities and to support them in their conservation efforts. The project will also work with local and national authorities to build awareness about conservation and the protection of tortoises and their habitat.