AZA Radiated Tortoise SAFE Messaging Toolkit

Photo by Stephen Nelson

1. Radiated tortoises are a Critically Endangered tortoise endemic Madagascar.[1]
    a. 95% of all reptile species in Madagascar are endemic, meaning they are found nowhere else on earth.
    b. The island is home to four species of tortoise, all of which are critically endangered.
    c. Island species are under particular threat from extinction.
2. Radiated tortoises live in the rapidly disappearing spiny forests of Southern Madagascar.[1,4]
    a. Radiated tortoises are herbivores and graze mostly on grasses, flowers, leaves, and succulents.[1,4]
    b. Spiny forests are disappearing, mainly threatened by expanding agriculture and charcoal production.[6]
3. Radiated tortoises are notable for their beautiful shell patterns which make them iconic, but also desirable in the illegal wildlife trade.
    a. Radiated tortoises are named after the yellow markings on their shell that radiate from the center of each scute.
    b. Radiated tortoises have a domed shell and elephantine feet characteristic of tortoises, rather than turtles.
    c. The shell of the tortoise is its main defense against native predators.
    d. The unique patterns on their shells drives demand for radiated tortoises in the Asian pet trade.[3]
4. Despite being nationally protected, threats facing radiated tortoises include hunting for bushmeat, the international pet trade, and habitat loss.[1,4]
    a. Though once one of the most common tortoises in the world, radiated tortoise populations have declined 80%.[1,3,4]
    b. The Tondroy and Mahafaly people of southwestern Madagascar have a fady, or a taboo, against catching or eating tortoises. However, new immigrants do not have that tradition and will eat or sell the tortoises.[3]
    c. Tortoise meat is also eaten in other parts of Madagascar as a luxury or novelty food.
    d. Many poached juvenile tortoises are destined for the pet trade in Asia.[3]
5. The threats facing radiated tortoises also impact other species, and turtles and tortoises as a whole are facing an extinction crisis.
    a. While long-lived, turtles and tortoises may take decades to reach maturity and their slow reproductive rate makes it difficult for populations to rebound.[4]
    b. Over one third of tortoise species are facing threats of extinction.

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c. Turtles and tortoises fill important roles in their habitats.

6. Without conservation efforts, radiated tortoises could go extinct within the next few decades. You can help turtles by:
    a. Supporting your local zoo or aquarium.
        i. Through the Radiated Tortoise Special Survival Plan, AZA institutions carefully manage the genetics of the population in human care to ensure a future for this species.
        ii. AZA zoos support field conservation of tortoise species and work alongside the US Wildlife Trafficking Alliance to stop the illegal wildlife trade.
        iii. Through the SAFE program, zoos work together to meet conservation goals to spread the word and save radiated tortoises.
    b. Support your local turtle and tortoise species.
        i. Roadkill is a leading cause of turtle death in the US. Help turtles and tortoises safely cross the road in the direction they are headed.
        ii. Many of the same threats to radiated tortoises face our native turtle species. Never take a wild turtle as a pet.
    c. Do your research before getting a turtle as a pet.
        i. Wild turtles should be left in their native habitat and never taken as pets.
        ii. Turtles and tortoises are long-lived and require specialized care.
    d. Donate money to conservation groups supporting efforts to save tortoises in the wild.
        i. The Turtle Survival Alliance is actively working alongside local peoples in Madagascar to educate people and save the tortoises.
    e. Spread awareness about the plight of turtles and tortoises.
        i. Post a “shellfie” with a radiated tortoise, encouraging people to learn more about radiated tortoises.
        ii. Make radiated tortoises your profile picture or cover photo on social media with links to the Turtle Survival Alliance.
        iii. Choose tortoise conservation as a topic for a school research paper.

Resources:

1. Leuteritz, T. & Rioux Paquette, S. (Madagascar Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Red List Workshop) 2008. *Astrochelys radiata*. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2008: e.T9014A12950491. http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2008.RLTS.T9014A12950491.en. Downloaded on 10 January 2019.
2. Egeler, J. 2000. "Astrochelys radiata" (On-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed February 24, 2019 at https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Astrochelys_radiata/
3. Rafeliarisoa et al. *Decline in the Range and Population Density of Radiated Tortoises, Astrochelys radiate, in Southern Madagascar.* Retrieved from http://www.chelonian.org/wp-content/uploads/file/CRM%206/15-Rafeliarisoa&al.pdf.
4. Edge of Extinction Radiated Tortoise. Radiated tortoise. Retrieved from http://www.edgeofexistence.org/species/radiated-tortoise/.
5. Walker, R. The Conservation Issues Facing the Critically Endangered Madagascar Radiated Tortoise (Astrochelys radiata). British Chelonia Group. http://www.britishcheloniagroup.org.uk/testudo/v7/v7n3walker.
6. Madagascar spiny thickets. World Wildlife Fund. Retrieved from https://www.worldwildlife.org/ecoregions/at1311.

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