

## The Rufford Small Grants Foundation

### Final Report

Congratulations on the completion of your project that was supported by The Rufford Small Grants Foundation.

We ask all grant recipients to complete a Final Report Form that helps us to gauge the success of our grant giving. The Final Report must be sent in **word format** and not PDF format or any other format. We understand that projects often do not follow the predicted course but knowledge of your experiences is valuable to us and others who may be undertaking similar work. Please be as honest as you can in answering the questions – remember that negative experiences are just as valuable as positive ones if they help others to learn from them.

Please complete the form in English and be as clear and concise as you can. Please note that the information may be edited for clarity. We will ask for further information if required. If you have any other materials produced by the project, particularly a few relevant photographs, please send these to us separately.

Please submit your final report to [jane@rufford.org](mailto:jane@rufford.org).

Thank you for your help.

**Josh Cole, Grants Director**

Grant Recipient Details	
<b>Your name</b>	Ivo Evstatiev Ivanchev
<b>Project title</b>	Conservation measures of globally endangered land tortoises: Spur-thighed and Spur-tailed ( <i>Testudo graeca iberica</i> and <i>Testudo hermanni boettgeri</i> ) in the Black Sea Coast Region, Bulgaria
<b>RSG reference</b>	
<b>Reporting period</b>	May 2008 – July 2009
<b>Amount of grant</b>	£4860
<b>Your email address</b>	<a href="mailto:geain2003@yahoo.com">geain2003@yahoo.com</a>
<b>Date of this report</b>	27.07.2009

**1. Please indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.**

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
Investigation along the north Coastal region in order to establish the most threatened sites and designation of appropriate preserved habitats for tortoises' relocation			✓	<p>We carried out field research along the Black Sea coast north of the town of Balchik. Two sites were selected as the most threatened tortoise habitats--Topola and Bozhurets, where golf courses were under construction. Both huge building sites occupy the entire strip of land adjacent to the beach. Formerly, these sites were inhabited by the most stable populations of <i>Testudo graeca</i> in the coastal region. Presumably many tortoises already had been annihilated during the initial excavation.</p> <p>For a relocation site, we selected the Bezhanovo Protected Area. This is inland from the coveted coastal area and thereby relatively safe from future real estate investment schemes. The same tortoise species is also present here. We have established good rapport with the mayor, and some local people have been trained to help with ongoing monitoring of the relocated tortoises.</p>
Field action: collecting specimens from the threatened sites and transportation in the Foundation Tortoises Centre			✓	<p>In the course of four excursions to the building sites, 163 specimens of <i>Testudo graeca</i> and 8 of <i>T. hermanni</i> were removed. Temporary, secure enclosures were made adjacent to our campsite, where the tortoises were housed until removal to the tortoise centre in Banya village.</p>
Volunteers training in field techniques and monitoring			✓	<p>The recruitment of volunteers was among the most successful activities achieved. In addition to the expertise of zoologists and veterinarians, local volunteers participated enthusiastically in the rescue work and were keen to learn about the tortoises' ecology, biology, and behaviour. About half of the young people showed sufficient interest in our mission to become volunteers for the Gea Chelonia Foundation, and have since participated in various related initiatives.</p>

Centre activities			✓	All tortoises were measured and medicated for enteric parasites via the use of the anti-helminths PANACUR and FRONT LINE. A full mensural data base (carapace length, midline width, maximum height, and weight) including distinguishing marks, collection date, and release date was created. Each specimen was permanently marked according to the system of Stubbs et al. (1984). Because so many people were eager to help, this cooperative work was carried out smoothly and more quickly than had been expected.
Releasing tortoises in the new habitats			✓	The most rewarding aspect of the project was the release of the tortoises at the Bezhanovo Protected Area. Trios consisting of one male and two females were released in suitable locations at least 150 - 200 m from one another. Releases were carried out in the early morning hours to minimize stressing the animals, and to allow them to find suitable shelter through the course of the day. On the first day of this conservation action, representatives from the Regional Inspection of the Environment and Hydrology were present, along with local officials and two television stations.
Creating a GIS database.			✓	The systematization and visualization of collected data was accomplished via GIS technology using MapInfo software. The map includes a topographic layer with data on every specimen released--species, ID number, estimated age, gender, size, weight, and GPS coordinates.
Project promotion			✓	This project was promoted in more institutions than had been originally foreseen. However we were not successful in presenting the project to the Working Group for the Conservation of Reptiles and Amphibians, nor to the Bulgarian Herpetological Association because their 2009 sessions were postponed. On the other hand we were able to make presentations to the Balkan Wildlife Association, the Faculty of Biology of Sofia University, the University

				<p>of Forestry, and to two public schools in the towns of Obzor and Biala.</p> <p>The greatest publicity was carried out via electronic media; information about the project appeared on more than 30 websites, besides 16 press articles, 2 live radio interviews, TV news reports, as well as on both major Bulgarian TV networks, BTV and NTV. A thousand leaflets were distributed throughout the target region, mostly in Balchik, Kavarna, Topola, and Bozhurets. Chiefly these were distributed in hotels, schools, municipal offices, and construction sites.</p> <p>As a member of the IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Specialist Group, Ivo Ivanchev shared information with and obtained insights from others experienced in such projects elsewhere in the world. Additional publicity came about via the Internet at <a href="http://www.geachelonia.hit.bg/project_rufford">www.geachelonia.hit.bg/project_rufford</a>.</p> <p>There, the project goals, activities, and funding sources are explained, illustrated by our photographs.</p> <p>Between 25th September and 12th October 2008 our referee James Buskirk visited the target sites and the Tortoise Centre in Bulgaria. He participated in our September monitoring and expressed pleasure with our accomplishments. Towards the end of his visit, a meeting was arranged in which he met with some of the leading Bulgarian herpetologists at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, in order to discuss project goals and results to date.</p>
<p>Development of documentation for protected area proposal of new sites.</p>			<p>✓</p>	<p>In the course of our work, the team proposed that potential sites near Bezhanovo and Bozhurets be placed under legal protection, in concert with members of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The "White Rocks" site in the vicinity of Balchik and Topola was chosen, and we selected an expert to compose an environmental impact report for the area to be protected. In March 2009 we submitted the proposal to</p>

				the Ministry of Environment and Hydrology. In the wake of recent parliamentary elections and changes in government, no official response has yet been received.
Monitoring the tortoises in the new areas and further estimation of their adaptation success.		✓		Twice the relocation site was visited, in September 2008 and May 2009. On the earlier visit, only 7 of the relocated tortoises could be found, probably due to the low seasonal tortoise activity. Therefore we were unable to make an adequate assessment of their adaptation status. During the second survey, as expected we found many more tortoises active, making more than 40 recaptures of released specimens, thereby indicating a favourable adaptation rate. However, further monitoring is essential to secure more complete data. Nonetheless we feel strongly that the basic goal of the project--to boost the likelihood of maintaining stable tortoise populations in the new habitat, and to assure the survival of the otherwise doomed Topola-Bozhurets population--has been achieved.

**2. Please explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled (if relevant).**

Two different developing companies now own the property of both construction sites. Initially, we thought it important to establish a connection and to request permission and support. One of the companies was very supportive, allowing us unsupervised entry at any time, and they even helped with gathering tortoises. We established good relations and explained in detail to the staff how to deal with any tortoise found, until we are able to pick it up. However, the other company refused to cooperate, and we were obliged to enter the terrain illegally (after the working day or on holidays), which made it harder to carry out satisfactory fieldwork.

During the first and the second action because of the high humidity and luxuriant vegetation our team found it harder finding tortoises in the field. This was the reason for the least number of collected specimens in comparison with the next two actions. We had to pass the terrain again every coming action to be sure we didn't miss some individuals.

**3. Briefly describe the three most important outcomes of your project.**

- The successful relocation of 171 tortoises from two building sites near Topola and Bozhurets villages to Bezhanovo protected area. This will ensure the likelihood that the population may will in the new habitat.

- Involving local people in our initiative and creating a very positive attitude about tortoise conservation and the GCF's mission. Most of the young people who had participated in the initial training course became enthusiastic and faithful volunteers for our organization. We will continue using this manpower in the future. We established a good relationship with local people and authorities.
- The experience from this project will be of great importance for our future work and for creating adequate steps for tortoise conservation elsewhere along the coast and throughout Bulgaria. By setting up favourable conditions for further monitoring of the survival rate of the relocated specimens, we will gain valuable scientific data.

**4. Briefly describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefited from the project (if relevant).**

We have made a promotional campaign that acquainted the local people with the harm of the illegal trade, human consumption and collection of specimens for pets and souvenirs. It turned out that most people didn't know tortoises are protected by the law. We also think we raised the awareness about tortoise conservation and thus increasing the chances of maintaining stable populations around the North Black Sea Coast. We registered significant increase of signals from local people from the region about tortoises in trouble after the promotion campaign.

Local young people were attracted to participate in ecological training. That was vital part of the project because it builds local capacity for nature protection. The initiative impacted on the local youth through developing social and instructive effect. They have been motivated to save and keep protecting their natural resources. They will have an opportunity to work in the tortoise centre of the Gea Chelonia Foundation or in its visitor centre in the future. Hopefully this attraction and stimulation will make them stay and work in their home towns instead of seeking jobs in remote big cities.

The young were keen about tortoises and showed great interest and wish for future cooperation with our team. Three of them become seriously interested in herpetology and showed very enthusiastic work in the field. We expect to teach them willingly and to help them study at the university.

**5. Are there any plans to continue this work?**

Yes. Now we have trained volunteers ready to join us next season to continue with relocation actions from threatened sites, and monitoring of relocated tortoises. Through increasing our promotion activities we intend to emphasise the prevention of habitat destruction.

**6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?**

The project results were included in our annual report to the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Waters. The uniqueness of this project in our country has already stimulated similar actions elsewhere, and has been shared with other organisations. We established close contacts with Green Balkans'

Wildlife Rescue Centre in the town of Stara Zagora and participated as an expert organisation in action for releasing confiscated tortoises in the Eastern Rhodopes Mountain.

We continue to share information about the initiative on internet forums and receive many comments and positive feedback, as well as commitments for cooperation next year. We also collaborate with the IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group as we borrowed from the experience of experts who have been doing similar work in other countries. At the end of 2010, after collecting sufficient data about the adaptation success of relocated tortoises, we intend to publish our results. We keep in close contact with Bulgarian and international experts involved in similar activities, and share our results with them. We do as much popularisation work as possible so as to use our project's results as the basis of better conservation work on a national scale. We have already received several written offers from foreign volunteers who want to join us.

At the end of 2009 we will present the project results at the annual meeting of the Working Group for Conservation of Reptiles and Amphibians and the Bulgarian Herpetology Association.

**7. Timescale: Over what period was the RSG used? How does this compare to the anticipated or actual length of the project?**

We used the RSGF grant from June 2008 until July 2009. The project lasted 15 months and we consider ourselves successful in having achieved our goals as set out in the application, and in sequence. However, in 2008 due to bureaucratic delays which impacted processing the paper work and receiving the bank transfer, we omitted working in the month of May, at the high of annual tortoise activity and thus the best month for rescuing imperiled tortoise. The tortoises were not nearly so numerous in July, when we finally were able to begin our field actions.

**8. Budget: Please provide a breakdown of budgeted versus actual expenditure and the reasons for any differences. All figures should be in £ sterling, indicating the local exchange rate used.**

Item	Budgeted Amount	Actual Amount	Difference	Comments
<b>1. Travel and subsistence for local team participating in field researches</b>				
1.1. Local transport – 7 persons x 4 months x £30	840	895	55	The difference is due to the increased transport costs throughout the country.
1.2. Fuel for investigation, field research, transportation and monitoring - 5000 km - total 400 litres x £0.8	320	340	20	The difference is due to the increased cost of fuel in Bulgaria.
1.3. Per diem and accommodation – 4 months x 10 days x 7 persons x £10 per day	2800	2800	0	Five to eight local volunteers participated in our 4 relocation actions.

<b>2. Visibility actions</b>				
2.1. Leaflet – services, offered circ. 1000, format A5, colour, glazed, 2x2	600	600	0	We designed the leaflet ourselves and did not calculate its cost within the rubric for this item.
<b>3. Development of documentation for protected areas proposal</b>				
	300	300	0	An expert was engaged and contracted to develop all documentation. The amount includes the insurance as well.
<b>4. Data analysis, entering GIS data base</b>				
	500	500	0	Provided by Ivo Ivanchev.
<b>Total</b>	5360	5435	75	

## 9. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?

Our experience has led us to discern how small our efforts are to prevent the annihilation of tortoises along the Black Sea coast, as we would like to extend our efforts to all building sites in the region. We consider the most important step in the future to be a dialogue with the control institutions over the environmental impact for changing the set of rules about the institutions controlling environment impacts, to change the rules concerning large scale land development. Only the joint endeavours of ecologists and investors can ensure the survival of biodiversity. We continue to emphasize public awareness campaigns to attract the investors' attention to the problem of habitat destruction and loss of endangered species, and to propose partnership with us for nature protection. When the official assessment of an investment plan indicates the presence of endangered species there has to be a stiff recruitment that the investor do the utmost to relocate them, and thereby get publicity. During the project implementation we have contacted foreign organizations having implemented similar relocations of tortoises from threatened sites. In some countries the investors are persuaded to support the relocation actions by all means even providing financial assistance for collection and transport.

## 10. Did you use the RSGF logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the RSGF receive any publicity during the course of your work?

We have used the RSGF logo on our information leaflet. We will send it to RSGF by post. We have sent photos from our media campaign to RSG showing the report with interviews during the tortoise release in the protected area. In every TV and radio broadcast RSG financial support was mentioned as the most vital factor for our work during this period. You will find enclosed some more photos showing the publicity of the project.

## 11. Any other comments?

I would like to thank RSGF for their support and understanding. I would also like to thank my team and all the volunteers who worked hard with passion and enthusiasm during the course of the whole project. Because of our friendship and love for tortoises some of the best Bulgarian experts preferred to come with me instead of staying with their families or having their annual vacation. This project is our

organisation first international and second in general project. It helped us learn a lot and get valuable and unique experience which will help us in the future.

Recently I have visited the Topola-Bozhurets site. It was a sad picture as everything we were concerned about was destroyed. I hope our work will prevent the total extermination of this population. I feel sorry for all the tortoises that become victim of human greed and stupidity and found their death under the machines.



1. In the beginning the target site looked like this



2. Although this habitat is almost fully destroyed some tortoises still can be found



3. Our team searching tortoises around the building sites



4. View from the building site



5. Transportation to the rescue Center in Banya



6. Demonstration how to measure the tortoises



7. Every specimen had to be weighed



8. A TV broadcasted the tortoises release in Bezhanovo protected area



9. In September 2008 Mr. Buskirk, our project referee visited the building site



10. Mr. Buskirk participated in the monitoring



11. The recaptured in the new habitat tortoises looked well



12. Ivo and J. Buskirk with herpetologists in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences



13. This season we continued the monitoring



14. We found almost 30% of the marked specimens



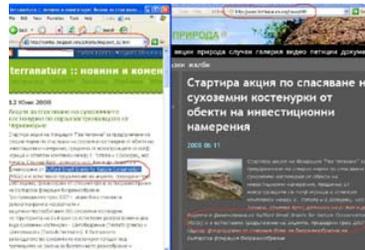
15. Marked tortoise



16. Every marked specimen was measured and weighted



17. Data was entered in the tortoise GIS



18. Our project was broadly popularized in Internet