

Project Update: December 2011

The Mediterranean spur-thighed tortoise *Testudo graeca* (L., 1758) inhabits in northern Africa, in southern Europe, in the south-west of Asia and in the Caucasus. On the territory of the Russian Federation it inhabits only in some places of the foothills of Krasnodar area and in the Republic of Dagestan. The species was put down: on the international list of protected species (IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals), in the Appendix of II Convention on the international trade in wild flora and fauna species (Convention on International trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora - CITES), in the Appendix of II Bern Convention (Bern Convention), in the Red Book of the Russian Federation in the category «1» as «a species with a constantly reduced number whose isolated populations are on the verge of disappearing», in the regional Red Books of Krasnodar area and the Republic of Dagestan. The species is proposed to be put down in the Red book of the Republic of Abkhazia that is being prepared now.



Photo 1. *T. graeca nikolskii* in natural habitats. Krasnodar area, Russia

The Mediterranean spur-thighed tortoises inhabiting on Krasnodar area and in the Republic of Abkhazia (the western Caucasus) are classified as a separate subspecies *T. graeca nikolskii*. On the territory of the Republic of Dagestan (the northern Caucasus) the subspecies *T. graeca pallasi* inhabits.



Photo 2. *T. graeca pallasii* in natural habitats. Republic of Dagestan, Russia

The main causes for the reduction of the number of the species, the reduction and fragmentation of the Mediterranean tortoise inhabited area are the anthropological transformation and destruction of the key habitats and also illegal catching the turtles for their selling and consequent keeping in people's houses. According to leading experts' opinions, the Mediterranean tortoise is one of the most endangered reptile species on the territory of the Russian Federation. The contemporary studies of the species condition aren't enough for taking efficient protection measures.

The work on the project of studying, popularizing and protecting the Mediterranean tortoise in the Caucasus (the project «Attention, a Turtle! ») started in 2006. In 2006, 2008-2009 and 2010-2011, the project was carried out with the support of Rufford Small Grants for Nature Conservation (RSGF).

The main results of the project «Attention, a Turtle! » in 2010-2011

A very important event took place in 2010. The Government of the Russian Federation gave an order (N1436-r from 2 September, 2010) to found the State Nature Reserve «Utrish» to preserve unique nature communities of dry subtropics of the Mediterranean type on the peninsula Abrau (the Black Sea coast, Krasnodar area, the Russian Federation). The area of this reserve is 10.008 hectares. It includes the grounds of the Forest Fund between the cities of Anapa and Novorossiysk. The area of the grounds is 9.225 hectares and 783 hectares of a water surface. The foundation of the reserve is the result of long-term efforts of a lot of experts and organizations. We had been working on this territory long before the reserve was founded. We've been cooperating with the reserve since its foundation. In 2011, we fulfilled the contract on the theme: «The estimation of a contemporary condition of the population of the Mediterranean tortoise (*Testudo graeca nikolskii*) on the territory of the State Nature Reserve «Utrish» and the creation of a complex of recommendations on optimizing the protection of this species».

As a result of our long-term research, it was determined that the peninsula Abrau including the territory of the reserve «Utrish» is a unique key (the most important) habitat of the Mediterranean tortoise of Nikolsky (*T. graeca nikolskii*). A large, stable, at different ages turtles population of about 5-6 thousand specimens inhabits there. As experts think it can make up about 20-30 % of the total number of this subspecies in the Caucasus. A sexual and aged structure of this population is close to optimum: there are all aged groups and the number of male and female specimens among adults is nearly 1:1.

The state of the natural environment of this species and the essential reduction in the anthropological load on the territory of the reserve «Utrish» that is a result of improving the protection system give us good reasons to predict a stable condition of this species on the peninsula Abrau and a gradual growth of its number within the borders of the reserve.



Photo 3. Most important habitats (key habitats) of *T. graeca nikolskii*. State Nature Reserve «Utrish», peninsula Abrau, Krasnodar area, Russia

After analysing the situation, we prepared some recommendations on the protection of the species and its following study. The basic protective recommendations are:

- The preservation of the integrity of the reserve territory (the prevention of its fragmentation as a result of a planned construction of highways through the reserve territory that will lead to the site on the sea coast which is now given to a private commercial firm for a long-term rent to build one more elite recreation centre there);
- The creation of one more new, especially protected, nature territory (the nature reserve) to preserve the second most important habitats of the Mediterranean tortoise of Nikolsky on Markhotskiy ridge between the cities of Novorossiysk and Gelendzik;

- Constant work on raising environmental awareness of the local population and tourists (particularly young people) in the cities of Anapa and Novorossiysk and in the other settlements on Krasnodar area for the popularization and propagation of the problems of the preservation of the biological diversity of the region and, in particular, the Mediterranean tortoises as a rare and disappearing species;
- The foundation on the basis of the reserve «Utrish» of the rehabilitation center and later - the nursery for the maintenance and cultivation of the Mediterranean tortoises with the purpose of creating a genetic reserve of this species and taking some young turtles back to the native places of dwelling under control of experts.
- Carrying out a complex of actions to prevent the presence domestic and half wild animals (dogs and pigs) on the territory of the reserve.

We plan to continue to cooperate with the reserve «Utrish» in 2012-2016 and our proposals to the head of the reserve are being prepared now.

Besides, the work on revealing new, earlier unknown location of *T. graeca nikolskii* within the area of its dwelling is being carried out. In the Republic of Abkhazia the micro population of the Mediterranean tortoise has been discovered for the first time on the right (western) bank of the river Bzyb which is an insuperable barrier to turtles. On the territory of Krasnodar dwelling of the species on the southern slope of Kotsekhur ridge near Aderbievka village to the north from Gelendzik town has been first confirmed.



In the Republic of Abkhazia the consultations with the head of the republican Committee on ecology and nature resources management about giving the status of the nature reserves to key habitats of the Mediterranean tortoises dwelling on Pitsunda-Myusserskiy height outside Pitsunda-Myusserskiy reserve were continued and the optimum borders of the suggested nature reserve were additionally specified. Unfortunately, the decision on this matter was postponed because of a sudden death of the President of Abkhazia Sergey Bagapsh and the following presidential elections and the change of the government of Abkhazia.

In December 2010 the residents of Sukhum city handed our old friend and partner, the vice-rector of Sukhum State University Dr. Victor Malandziya a Mediterranean tortoise that had been found in the suburbs of the city.

Photo 4. The Mediterranean spur-thighed tortoises in rehabilitation center, «Safari-park» in Gelendzik town, Krasnodar area, Russia

The animal was probably brought from Pitsunda region. The turtle spent winter safely at Victor Malandziya's place and in June 2011 it was let out by us in optimum habitats of turtles dwelling next to the borders of Pitsunda-Myusserskiy reserve.

Our cooperation with a private «Safari-park» in Gelendzik town has been continued under the agreement on joint actions to create and develop a rehabilitation center and in the future – a nursery for the Mediterranean tortoises. (The agreement was reached in 2009). In 2011, in addition to two earlier constructed open-air cages of the rehabilitation center with about 15 adult Mediterranean tortoises, a new open-air cage was constructed. We hope that it's more successful location will allow supervising condition and behaviour of kept animals more carefully. There will be an information stand about turtles and problems of their protection near the new open air cage for numerous visitors to «Safari-park».

In October 2011, 2 newly-born baby turtles were found for the first time for 3 last years in the open-air cage where adult turtles were kept. The babies were put in a special warmed up terrarium and are supervised by the main veterinarian of «Safari-park» Elena Peretokina.

In 2010 the officials of the Supervisory Natural Recourses Management Service on our initiative confiscated 8 young Mediterranean tortoises (aged 1-7 years) from illegal trade in the market (Novorossisk city, Krasnodar area). The animals were transferred to the rehabilitation center in «Safari – park».



Photo 5. The officials of the Supervisory Natural Recourses Management Service on our initiative confiscated 8 young Mediterranean tortoises from illegal trade in the market (Novorossisk city, Krasnodar area).

In 2011 in the cities of Suhum, Pitsunda, Gagri, Adler, Sochi, Tuapse, Gelendzik, Novorossisk and Krasnodar we checked up places of possible trade in turtles (pet-shops and street markets). The facts of illegal circulation of Mediterranean tortoises and their derivatives weren't revealed. In

Novorossisk during this action one specimen of the legless lizard *Pseudopus apodus* was withdrawn from illegal trade (this species is included in the Red book of Krasnodar area). Then the lizard was let out on the territory of «Safari-park».

We created and printed the posters «Attention, a Turtle! » (format A2, the circulation of 1000 copies) and the pocket calendars for 2012 (the circulation of 2000 copies) with original author's photos of the Mediterranean tortoises on the front side and the name of the project, logos and the contact dates of RSGF and the Society of the protection of amphibians and reptiles on the back. The posters and calendars are distributed free-of-charge with the purpose of popularization our project on studying and protecting the Mediterranean tortoise.

So we consider the fulfilment of the project «Attention, a Turtle! » in 2011 to be successful as a whole and we are also going to continue it further. We are deeply thankful to Rufford Small Grants for Nature Conservation for long-term support of our project and are ready to continue the cooperation.



Photo 6. The coordinator of the project, Dr. Mark Pestov with very large individual of Mediterranean spur-thighed tortoise