

The 2015 Annual Symposium of the British Chelonia Group (BCG) took place on Saturday 14th March at the Open University, Milton Keynes, and was very well attended, as Christine Tilley BVSc MRCVS reports.

After registration and coffee, and a chance to browse the various stalls and displays, the morning session was opened in the Berrill Theatre by the chairman, Henny Fenwick. The overall theme of the symposium was 'Chelonia and Man'.

A global overview

Proceedings began with Professor Ian Swingland OBE, who outlined the achievements of the many conservation bodies with which he has been involved. He described how he helped Lee Durrell, of Jersey Zoo fame, set up a project in Madagascar for saving the rare ploughshare tortoise (*Astrochelys yniphora*) from extinction. This species is so-called thanks to the projection at the front of its plastron (the underside of the shell) with which it can up-end opponents.

Prof Swingland talked about how in the 1970s, he was one of the people who had stumbled on the idea of environmental sex determination (also known under the acronym of TSD), by observing nesting

The ploughshare tortoise showing the distinctive prong on the plastron.



Talking chelonians



tortoises on Aldabra, and he found that he could sex hatchlings by counting the scales on their tails. He listed the many threats to chelonia, which included the high demand for attractive tortoises, the encroachment of man into their habitats, and corruption and political meddling in conservation projects.

His view of the situation of chelonians in the modern world ranged from despair at the plundering of pretty species for the illicit trade, to hope for the future, as there will always be people dedicated to conserving endangered species. This was well-illustrated by his involvement with the SOPTOM enterprise that set up the Tortoise Village at Gonfaron in France in 1988, with Bernard Deveaux and David Stubbs. After many years of success, particularly with Hermann's tortoises (*Testudo hermanni*), plans are underway to improve the facilities at a new site.

Veterinary care

Next, veterinary surgeon John Chitty, who specialises in exotics, spoke about diagnostics in chelonians. He went through the 'why, when and how?' of the various procedures available for tortoises, explaining clearly their particular usefulness in individuals where the signs of illness may be hard to detect, especially if they have withdrawn into their shell.

Blood sampling was clearly described, with close-ups of different techniques, and X-rays and scans were shown. He emphasised the importance of testing in deciding the outlook of the case, as well as the treatment plan, highlighting the reasons for the high cost of veterinary treatment.

Detailing injuries

A short report followed from Professor John Cooper, FRCVS, and his wife Margaret, on their continuing work in Kenya. They shared anecdotes showing how their workshops pass information to vets and reptile keepers, to improve reptile care both in captivity and in the wild. Even a cattle farmer had attended, to learn about the interaction between snakes and his stock!

The speakers outlined their next project, when they plan a detailed assessment of the many injuries found in wild tortoises in Kenya, particularly to the carapace. This will expand on work already done with a novel technique of shell repair using dental plaster, which they have successfully trialled on a few captive animals.

A break then followed for a buffet lunch, with a chance to meet up with old friends and make new ones, and purchase tortoise-related gifts, books and paintings. And, of course, to discuss tortoises.

The lost years

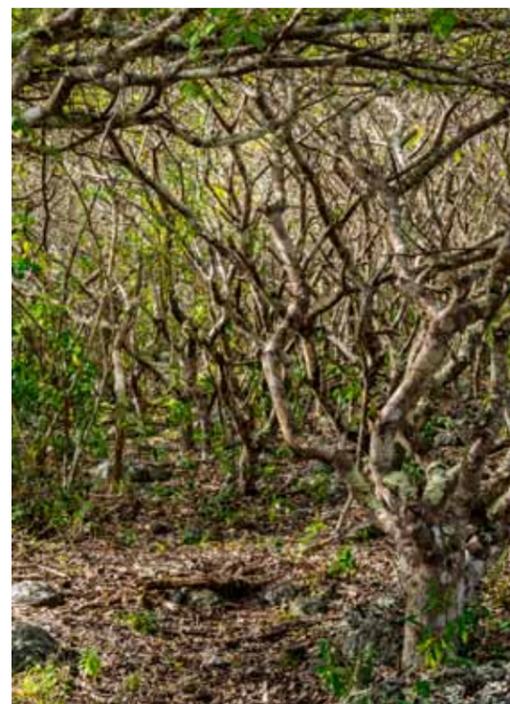
Feeling well-refreshed by lunch, the delegates returned for the afternoon session, which was introduced by the Vice-chair, Anne Rowberry. The next talk was given by Ian Dunn, CEO of the Galapagos Conservation Trust. His topic was the 'Lost years' of the Galapagos giant tortoises (*Chelonoidis nigra*), by which he meant the gap of several years after the young hatch from the nest and then disappear into the undergrowth, during which time their movements are virtually unknown. The current project, co-sponsored by the BCG, aims to fill this gap in their life history, using GPS tracking. It is already known that the tortoises undertake

seasonal migrations, changing altitude to take advantage of the best foraging opportunities. For this tortoise tracking, they are making use of the Icarus project, whereby information on animal movements is relayed by satellite. Ian recommended the Movebank website which tracks animal migration and is freely available at <https://www.movebank.org/> on the internet.

He also described the threats facing the Galapagos Islands and the animals, mainly from introduced species such as feral pigs that dig up tortoise nests, but also from alien plants like bramble that hinder the tortoises' movements. On a brighter note, he explained that the local government and other organisations were doing all that they could to limit the adverse effects and promote the future of the tortoises through breeding programmes and pest control, combined with effective legislation and education.

Living with turtles

Dr Peter Richardson's presentation 'Talking Turtle in the Big South' followed, describing his work with



Tracking studies are now underway to study the movements of young Galapagos giant tortoises.

the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) on the Turks and Caicos Islands in the Caribbean. Their fringing coral reefs and seagrass beds support a declining population of hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*).

Nesting had been wiped out from the inhabited islands, but it has been possible to protect the breeding population in the remaining areas. Peter had learned first-hand that hawksbill turtles – the ones formerly plundered for 'tortoiseshell' – would swim towards you, and so were very easy to catch. Greens, on the other hand, had the sense to swim away.

The main focus was on the fishing community, not only because of the tradition of taking turtles for meat but also because of the many turtles caught accidentally. They employed a social scientist to talk to people and work out new strategies with the fishermen.

He gained their respect and trust, and with a programme of educational films put in place by the MCS, plus new legislation, coastal communities have been persuaded that limited harvesting of sea turtles is the way forward. This ensures a viable turtle population and an income from ecotourism generated through activities such as swimming with turtles.

Treating turtles

At this point, a break for tea gave a last chance to chat and visit the stands. The final lecture was from vet David Perpinan, an expert in the veterinary treatment of exotics, who spoke enthusiastically on the medical management of sea turtles. He began by explaining how the type of illness or injury encountered depended on factors such as age or which ocean the turtle inhabited (with most fish hook injuries, for example, being encountered in the Mediterranean).

As with tortoises, captive sea turtles can develop severe deformities if kept in unsuitable conditions or on the wrong diet. Mortality can also be caused by humans in the wild, either directly, by boat strikes, or indirectly through littering the oceans with plastic for example, which can resemble jellyfish to turtles encountering it. This is then ingested, and causes a blockage, often condemning the unfortunate reptile to a slow, painful death.



Turtles may inadvertently ingest plastic debris floating in the oceans.

A wide range of injuries was shown, some of them incredibly severe. The treatments described included 'Medihoney', which has natural antiseptic properties, and waterproof bandages and epoxy. With their amazing powers of recovery however, many turtles are clearly capable of surviving terrible injuries.

Awards

The proceedings were rounded off by several presentations. The Kay Gray Award, in memory of the Group's benefactress, was presented to Anne Campbell of the Cheshire regional group for her outstanding contribution to chelonian care and conservation.

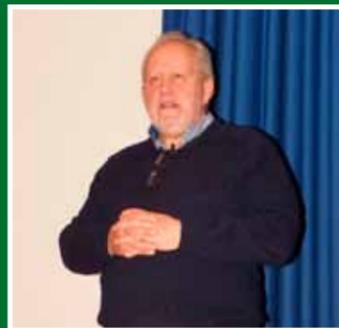
A cheque was presented to Pauline Kidner of the Secret World sanctuary in Somerset, and another to the BCG on behalf of Exotic Direct Insurance. A number of young people working with animals in a veterinary or animal care role received certificates for attending the symposium as part of their Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

The final event was the distribution of raffle prizes, after which the delegates made their way home having enjoyed the day. The BCG will be holding another symposium at the same venue in March next year and look forward to welcoming everybody. ❖

Further information

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All photos courtesy Margaret E. Cooper.



Professor Ian Swingland OBE speaking about conservation of chelonia.



Veterinary surgeon John Chitty talking about diagnostic techniques in tortoises.



Peter Richardson describing the MCS's work with sea turtles in the Turks and Caicos islands.



David Perpinan MRCVS speaking about the medical management of sea turtles.



Anne Campbell with the rose bowl presented to her as part of the Kay Gray Award.



Members of the Cheshire Group of the BCG, with Anne Campbell holding the rose bowl presented to her as part of the Kay Gray Award.



Some of the delegates who were presented with CPD certificates for attending the symposium as part of their continuing education.



John Hayward, National Theft Register coordinator, presents a cheque for BCG funds on behalf of Exotic Direct insurance to chairman Henny Fenwick.