

GATHERING PACE

CATALONIA IS HOME TO HERMANN'S TORTOISE, A BREED GRADUALLY INCREASING IN NUMBERS

BY JAMES TOWNSEND

The black and yellow, hard-shelled animal plods along, its head wagging intently from side to side. Its armoured body glides unscathed over the spiny undergrowth as it searches out a tasty morsel to feed upon. This is Hermann's tortoise (*Testudo hermanni hermanni*), last and only remaining native of the Mediterranean tortoise. They live in the final spurs of the Pyrenees, in the north-eastern corner of Girona province, known as the Alberes range.

At last count, there were an estimated 7,000 specimens living in the wild in this part of Catalonia. The habitat of Hermann's tortoise is characterized by lightly dense Mediterranean forest with a permeable tree structure and abundant undergrowth. However, this living area has been used humans for centuries to cultivate vineyards and olive trees, produced charcoal, extracted cork, picked acorns to feed pigs and raise stock. This transformation of the environment has caused Hermann's tortoise to increasingly reside in smaller, isolated spots and become rare in (or even disappear) wide areas that were once its home. In order to protect this population from extinction, a protected natural park was created in 1986 – the Natural Park of the Albera.

The Centre de Reproducció de Tortugues de l'Albera at Garriguella inside the park is dedicated to the study, conservation and reproduction of Hermann's tortoise. As well as breeding and releasing tortoises into the wild, specialists do research into the biology and ecology of Hermann's tortoise, as well as the density and structure of its population and its sex ratio.

The area of distribution of the species today covers approximately 350 square kilometres at an altitude of 100 to 400 metres above sea level. Although in certain valleys density can exceed 3 or 4 specimens per hectare, the total average is much lower, with 0,3 specimens per hectare. According to the centre's specialists, in ideal circumstances the Alberes range could support at least 50,000.

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To help achieve, they release two-year-old tortoises into the wild annually, sometimes as many as 400. The creatures are marked, and sometimes have small radio transmitters with a six to eight month lifespan attached to them, so they can be tracked and the centre to learn about their growth, movement and habits.

In addition to the historical human pressure from agricultural activities, forest fires are one of the main causes of the decline of Hermann's tortoise. They are especially damaging when several happen in a short period of time, as regularly occurs, as this hinders the normal regeneration of the species.

In the past another threat to the species was the demand from people who wanted one as a pet, which led to them being collected in large numbers. A Catalan law finally prohibited possession and sale some years ago. However, it would be foolish to think that this practice has entirely ceased. Tortoises are still caught and sold to collectors without concern for what this represents for the survival of the species. As Joan Budó, a technician at the centre, explained, “This tortoise and the more than 320 [other] species in the world are wild animals and their conservation happens surviving in their natural habitats. To keep them in captivity in a garden or terrarium, turning them into pets, is just another way to extinguish them.”

A visit to the Centre de Reproducció de Tortugues in Garriguella is the perfect opportunity to get to know an often ignored part of Catalonia’s natural history. Here children and adults alike learn about Hermann’s tortoise and how it lives, increasing their environmental awareness and understand how man and nature can better accommodate each other.

More info ...

Tortoises hibernate in winter, sinking into a lethargic state that reduces their vital functions to a minimum. During this two- to four-months period, they remain buried under earth and foliage. In spring the sun activates the reproduction process, and they breed. Tortoises, like most reptiles, reproduce laying eggs. After fecundation by the male and gestation the female digs a small nest in the ground where she will lay from three to six eggs. At birth the tortoises are no larger than the face of a wristwatch, about 2.5-3 centimetres. Despite such small beginnings, adult tortoises can live for between 70 and 100 years.

Centre de Reproducció de Tortugues de l'Albera Tel. 972 55 22 45 www.tortugues.cat
Summer every day from 10am - 6pm; spring and autumn: open from 10am to 1pm and 3pm to 5pm, closed on Mondays. The centre is closed to the public from November 1st to March 19th.

How to get there? From Figueres take road N 260 towards Llançà. At about 12km, turn left into Garriguella, then follow the signs to the Centre de Reproducció de Tortugues.