





TEAMING UP

FOR THE RADIATED TORTOISE

Goals Scored in Madagascar
Conservation Effort

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS



SOCCER AND THE RADIATED TORTOISE. A FASTPACED GAME AND A SLOWMOVING ANIMAL.

It's hard to see an obvious link between the two until you hear about an exciting partnership between Utah's Hogle Zoo in Salt Lake City, Utah, the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) and the One World Play Project. Soccer for Sokake (the Malagasy word for the radiated tortoise) is one successful component of a comprehensive public awareness and education campaign designed to promote tortoise conservation in Madagascar.

The radiated tortoise, which is found only in the country's spiny forest, is traditionally revered in the local culture. However, it is critically endangered because of outsiders who hunt them for food and the international pet trade.

Christina Castellano, general curator at Utah's Hogle Zoo, had been working in Madagascar for more than a decade when she arrived at the Zoo three years ago, and her commitment to saving the tortoise never wavered.

"The Zoo generously took the tortoise conservation project on board, and we continued to develop a solid relationship with the Turtle Survival Alliance. It was a natural partnership because both of our organizations are passionate about tortoise conservation and are extremely steadfast in our determination to save this species."

Game Plan

The Zoo and the TSA started to implement a multi-faceted public awareness campaign about tortoise conservation in 2011. Their activities have included holding workshops on caring for the tortoises; distributing armbands, T-shirts and posters; showing a conservation film; and empowering the local gendarmes with donations of money,

bicycles and motorcycles to help them catch the poachers.

"We also got communities to sign agreements, known as DINA, in which the people in the villages pledged to guard against poachers," said Rick Hudson, president of the Turtle Survival Alliance and conservation biologist at the Fort Worth Zoo in Fort Worth, Texas. "Our campaign to expose the whole tortoise poaching crisis really steamrolled beyond our expectations. I think our timing was good and that people were tired of seeing outsiders coming in and taking their tortoises – they were receptive to a change."

The conservationists continued to look for creative methods to communicate the conservation messages in a way

that made sense to the villagers.

"The radiated tortoise is important to the Malagasy people," said Castellano. "They believe that it possesses the souls of their ancestors and that if they care for the tortoises, they will receive blessings ... but the concept of extinction is foreign. When you live day to day, it's hard to think too far into the future."

In an effort to facilitate learning, Castellano's team decided to try play-based education, using soccer as the universal connector.

"It's all about finding that common thread," she said. "When we approach these situations, we are willing to try anything. We'll establish a connection any way we can. We have to be open to new ideas. I read that some primate conservation groups were developing soccer teams to build relationships with local communities in Africa, so I said yes, let's give it a go!"

Plans included creating soccer-related educational activities and providing soccer equipment to schools in the villages where the public awareness campaign had been implemented. However, Madagascar's harsh environment isn't conducive to keeping soccer balls in good condition. Enter the One World Play Project, an organization that is committed to bringing the transformative power of play to children across the world by providing them with balls that were designed to survive the toughest environments without ever going flat. The ultra-durable One World Futbol can last for years with no need for pumps or needles.

Castellano submitted a proposal to launch a One World Give Balls Campaign for the soccer project, and it fit the campaign criteria perfectly, according to Neill Duffy, chief catalyst at the One World Play Project. "We only give to organizations, not individuals. We try to remain apolitical and neutral, but we require that at least 30 people should have access to one ball. And we want the organization to use play to address social issues."

Interested individuals can log on to the site and donate money for one ball or choose the Buy One, Give One option, in which you can purchase a ball for yourself and donate one to the project (www.oneworldplayproject.com/campaign/utahs-hogle-zoo/).

Castellano sees great potential and synergy in the three-pronged collaboration with TSA and One World Play Project. "TSA is committed to zero turtle extinctions; One World drives social change and gives us a new international audience to tap into. And our Zoo is a conservation organization that educates and connects over a million guests each year not only to tortoises in Madagascar but to other endangered wildlife throughout the world. Partnering with TSA and One World forms a powerful trifecta."



Large tortoises are illegally harvested for their meat, and piles of shells can be seen in some backyards.

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After being seized by officials, these illegally collected tortoises were transported back to the forest.

Game Play

The Utah's Hogle Zoo team implemented Soccer for Sokake in the village of Lavanono for a week during the fall of 2014.

"We did this pilot program in one village that was very interested in the education piece and learning about the environment, and they were passionate about soccer," said Chris Schmitz, education curator at Utah's Hogle Zoo. Although the original plan called for working with a school, there was no primary school in Lavanono. But there was an adult soccer club whose members had to walk to another village in order to get equipment so they could play, and they became the project partner.

The president of the village agreed to select coaches, create teams and animal mascots and provide everyone's shoe and clothing sizes for the uniforms provided. Since Utah's Hogle Zoo wanted the initiative to be a group effort, the team asked what the villagers would contribute to the project, and they said they would prepare a field for the tournament.

The Zoo team developed the conservation messaging in conjunction with the villagers. "You don't tell people what to do," said Schmitz. "We listened to what they needed and wanted and came up with messages that would resonate with members of their community."

Schmitz and her team created a soccer skills activity to go with each of the five messages:

1. Wildlife conservation requires teamwork.
2. Everyone can make a difference in protecting the tortoises and the other animal mascots.
3. Everyone is responsible for tortoise conservation and ultimately, environmental stewardship.
4. Be a defender of wildlife by not supporting tortoise collection.

5. These animals occur nowhere else in the world, and it is up to us to protect them in our homeland.

For example, message number four linked to goatending practice. Four players wore necklaces with a card illustrating a tortoise threat such as a picture of tortoise meat or tortoises in the back of a van. Those children took up offensive positions, while a fifth child was the goaltender, wearing a conservationist placard that showed an action such as a tortoise being measured or put back in the forest. It was the perfect example of play-based learning that provided a way for children to gain the knowledge they need to become the next generation of conservationists.

"It is a growing movement globally to see the value of play as a platform to deal with social issues," said Duffy. "Often it's difficult to engage people on a subject you want to address. But once they're engaged in play, you can integrate what you want to communicate."



Hudson, too, was particularly impressed with the villagers' response. "What surprised me was how the people threw themselves into the whole program. Their competitive spirit really came out. Poverty is so ingrained there; when you create a soccer championship, it takes them away from that for a while. It's clear to me now that soccer can be transformational."

Castellano reports that the children scored very high on post-event evaluations with multiple-choice questions, demonstrating that they did learn the conservation messages associated with the activities.

Duffy sees great potential in this education/conservation/soccer model and said, "This is a really interesting story to tell. It's not just helping the organization and the village. It's raising the awareness so maybe other zoos will want to do something similar."

"I remember one little boy who had a picture of a Madagascar kingfisher, but he had never seen a crayon before. I took it and colored a little bit, and he got so animated. His picture looked exactly like the real bird."

Gooooaaaaa!!!!

Schmitz and the team spent the first few days training the coaches on the field-based activities and how to use soccer fundamentals to promote the messaging. For the next two days, the children's teams moved among craft stations where they created team banners, animal mascot sticks and tortoise containers, as well as visited education stations where they worked on soccer skills and learned conservation messages. The program culminated with the Tortoise Tournament and Game Day.

"We had 200 kids, 10 teams and 20 coaches, and several hundred people came to watch the tournament," said Schmitz. "The coaches completely blew us away. We taught them and then watched from the sidelines as they drove those messages home. We also had no idea how much talent there was in the village. The kids wrote poems and songs and drew pictures. It was great. We brought pictures of animals to color, and I remember one little boy who had a picture of a Madagascar kingfisher, but he had never seen a crayon before. I took it and colored a little bit, and he got so animated. His picture looked exactly like the real bird."

And as the Utah's Hogle Zoo team prepares to recreate this program in other villages, Castellano is optimistic about the future.

"Using soccer – such a universal and culturally relevant activity – to facilitate tortoise conservation has resulted in one of the most successful community-based programs that we've done so far in Madagascar," she said. "We are very hopeful that together we can make a difference. This can be a true conservation success story with a very happy ending."

Mary Ellen Collins is a writer based in St. Petersburg, Fla.

For details on how to engage with One World Play, please email partnerships@oneworldplayproject.com.

