

# INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF CHELONIAN CONSERVATION

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## Proceedings



*Astrochelys yniphora* is the rarest tortoise in the world. Reared at Ampijoroa, in Malagasy, and at St Catherine Island (in this photo), its total strength never exceed a few ten individuals in captivity and a few hundred ones in the wild. An excellent conservation programme concerns this animal, leaded by the Jersey Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Nevertheless, at the beginning of may 1996, part of the tortoise populations (adults and juveniles) have been stolen at Ampijoroa, flying specialists into a rage and disappointment. So, this tortoise is a symbol, by its scarceness, by the efforts made to protect it, and by the threats which hang over it, of the difficult conservation of the tortoises in the world.

EDITIONS  SOPTOM

## STATUS AND CONSERVATION OF *Chelodina mccordi*, AN ISOLATED AND RESTRICTED FRESHWATER TURTLE FROM ROTI ISLAND, INDONESIA

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The Roti snake-necked turtle, *Chelodina mccordi* Rhodin, 1994, is restricted to the small southeast Indonesian island of Roti (1200 sq. km), just west of Timor. The species is isolated from all other members of its genus, which occur either in Australia or New Guinea. Roti Island constitutes a small splintered fragment of Gondwanaland with an ancient retained Australian chelid turtle fauna and no evidence of more recent Laurasian turtle dispersal. Most of Roti is xeric hilly countryside without permanent water and has little suitable habitat for freshwater turtles. Small seasonal lowland and coastal streams do not appear to support freshwater turtle populations. *Chelodina mccordi* appears to be restricted in distribution to limited inland highland plateau areas of mesic habitat and permanent lentic freshwater lakes, of which there are few. The species is distributed along the northern-draining southwestern central highland plateau between 100 & 150 m elevation, present in permanent and semi-permanent shallow eutrophic lakes and swamps, and often dispersing into adjacent rice paddies (sawah) and irrigation ditches. It is distributed from about Batoengalo in the northeast to about Ombok - Busalangga in the southwest, an area of only about 70 sq. km. The species does not appear to enter the small ephemeral seasonal streams and rivulets that drain the central highlands, and does not appear to be found at lower altitudes or on the narrow coastal plain. The human population on Roti is small, agriculturally subsistence-based, and the people do not eat freshwater turtles. There is currently no industry or significant development on the island. The only presently definable risk to *C. mccordi* is the exotic animal trade - a trade which is already prevalent on Roti, and actually helped originally to confirm the presence of the species on the island. However, when the trade started on Roti, it was simply a convenient place to obtain what was thought to be *C. novaeguineae*, a species hard to obtain legally in New Guinea. Now that *C. mccordi* has been described as an isolated and restricted new species, the demand in the trade may increase. Whether this will lead to increased exploitation and a diminishing population remains to be seen, but the risk is certainly significant. By the IUCN Species Survival Commission's new criteria for Red List Categories, *C. mccordi* is classified as Vulnerable due to its markedly restricted area of occupancy of only about 70 sq. km, and could quickly and easily achieve Endangered status with any significant decrease in its population. Combining this with possible environmental disasters or habitat degradation places the species at high risk of decline and possible extinction. *Chelodina mccordi* will require careful monitoring if we are to avoid losing it.