

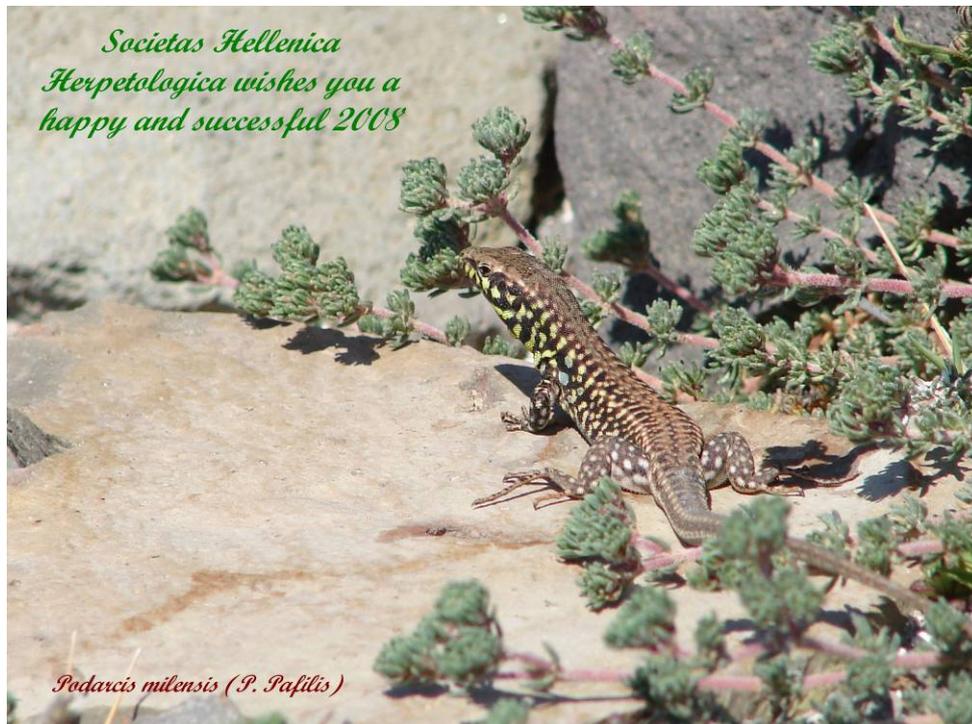


SOCIETAS HELLENICA HERPETOLOGICA NEWSLETTER

Issue 7

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SHH activities

Herpetological excursion

It was about two years ago when the idea of an “herpetological mission” sprang up, with the aim of getting in touch with as many amphibian and reptile enthusiasts as possible. That thought, which took quite some time of planning, became a reality last spring on 29/4/2007.

The participation was more encouraging than expected, making the room of the single bus we rent far too small for the 68 participation forms we received. Finally, 48 people made the trip to Stymphalia of which only 4 were members of SHH!

Most participants were students of Biological Sciences but amateur herpetologists and environmentally aware people were also present. It is touching that several people not living in Athens joined us after traveling from their places the day before. Apart from students of Athens University (the most numerous), the Universities of Thessaloniki, Patra, Ioannina and Aegean were represented also.



(photo P. Pafilis)

The 2,5 hour trip to Stymphalia was enough for the participants in order to make friends and listen to SHH members presenting the Society’s aims and activities as well as diagnostic features of amphibians and reptiles. It was noon when we reached Stymphalia and the participants formed three groups, each led by a SHH member. The



Lake Stymphalia (Photo P. Pafilis)

groups moved along the shores of the lake, trying to cover the biggest area possible and record as many species as possible. Apart from observing the animals, each group of participants caught some individuals and kept them for a little in order to photograph and show them to the others. The enthusiastic “collectors” enabled all of us to have good views and photos of most species native in the area of Stymphalia. Among them, the most striking was a superb leopard snake, a pair of marginated tortoises during mating and many newborn grass snakes that they won most of the flattering and tender comments.

The wandering continued along the dirt roads made in the western, rocky part of the lake, having excellent view of all the Stymphalia estuary and the groups ended up, happy, tired and hungry at a local tavern.

During our trip back to Athens, the climate was more than warm and all the participants declared that they would happily take part to similar herpetological trips. There were no few those who proposed that the future expeditions will, hopefully, last more than a single day. Any volunteers?



Some of the species observed during the herpetological trip to Lake Stymphalia (photo El. Menexiadou).

Panagiotis Pafilis
pafman@umich.edu

Management Board of SHH

The management board of the Societas Hellenica Herpetologica consists of:

President: Maria Dimaki

Vice-President: Panagiota Maragou

Secretary: Achilleas Dimitropoulos

Vice-Secretary: Yiannis Ioannides

Members: Efstratios Valakos, Panagiotis Pafilis

6-year report on the implementation of the Directive 92/43/EEC.

On May 2007 the SHH together with the non-governmental organizations Archelon, Hellenic Ornithological Society, Hellenic Zoological Society, Kallisto, Medasset and WWF Greece sent a letter to the Minister of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works Mr. G. Souflias, complaining on the process for the development of the 2nd six-year report on the implementation of the Directive 92/43 in Greece. The NGOs criticized the fact that the Ministry asked with a great delay the voluntary submission of data an issue that raised valid concerns regarding the completeness of the final report. Another issue of concern is that instead of pursuing the establishment of a constant communication with experts from the groves of Academe or NGOs, the Ministry chooses to consult experts only in emergencies and under extremely tight deadlines. Finally however the most important problem is the lack of a monitoring programme that would cover at least the most important species and habitats.

The NGOs never received a response from the Ministry. The draft of the six-year report was published for consultation on autumn 2007. The final report is not available yet.

Panagiota Maragou
WWF Greece
p.maragou@wwf.gr

Protection and management of species

Regarding the Joint Ministerial Decision on western Milos.

With a delay of several years and the condemnation of Greece from the European Court of Justice, a Joint Ministerial Decision on this subject was published in issue 1071 (December 2006) of the Government Gazette. Under the title "Determination of terms and restrictions on the protection, conservation and management of nature and landscape in land and aquatic areas of western Milos" different terms for the protection of the habitats of the endemic Milos Viper (*Macrovipera schweizeri*) -a priority species in Community Directive 92/43- are determined. The main question is whether all the provisions of this Decision are also indeed a happy ending regarding the viper.

According to the JMD the entire western Milos is separated into four protection zones. Zone I includes eight relatively small areas; most of them are indeed important for the viper. Zone II constitutes a single and substantially larger area, which encompasses and unifies the Zone I areas, with the exception of Achivadolimni and Alyki. To a large extent the terms of protection on these two Zones are similar. Mining and almost all forms of building construction are prohibited, while special terms are placed on the remaining activities that provide a satisfactory degree of protection for the western Milos habitats. Similar terms of protection are provided for Zone IV, which concerns the coasts of southwestern Milos. This Zone is differentiated from the previous in that it includes mainly marine area and two relatively small terrestrial areas that are of some interest for the Milos viper. This delineation causes problems to the coastal fishermen of the region as it strictly prohibits any coastal professional fishery with either nets or trawl lines. However such prohibition is not supported by any relevant study for the protection of the Monk Seal – another EU priority species in this area.

These three zones protect a sufficient percentage of important viper's habitats but not all of them. Most regions near coasts and beaches are not included in the strictly protected zones. All the other part of western Milos that also includes critical viper habitats is included in Zone III (Protection Area P10). The terms of protection in this Zone are very different from the other three. The building of private houses is permitted in Zone III as long as the property in question is at least 0.8 ha. This is not expected to create particularly serious problems, if we take into consideration that the properties in the western Milos are usually very large, and the segmentation of land is not easy according to the legislation, because of the relatively limited road network. Additionally large parts of this area are considered as "forest area" and cannot be built. However in this zone the creation of big hotel units is also permitted with favourable terms of land cover, paving the road to the heavy tourist exploitation of western Milos. The only restriction is that the hotel owner must hold at least 5 ha of land, but that isn't expected to be a limitation factor for the tourist exploitation, because as was mentioned before, the properties are very large. Moreover the JMD allows, with the exception of Zone I, "the maintenance, improvement and pavement of the existing, at the time of publication of the present decision, road network as well as the construction of new roads". Road accidents are a recognised mortality cause for the Milos viper and this term is expected to aggravate the situation. Also this will have consequences in the segmentation of Zone III.

The worst part of the new legislation is related to mining activities. According to the JMD allowed activities include "the existing and legally functioning mines and quarries, their accompanying works as well as their possible extensions, renewals or modifications based on the approval of the relevant environmental terms". This could be considered a pragmatic approach, as the removal of functioning quarries is not easy

and can take several years, however in another paragraph things become worse: "The operation of new mines and quarries is allowed with a relative decision of the Minister of Development after the conform opinion of relevant Ministers, for activities of particular economic importance that can be realised for reasons of essential public interest and after the approval of environmental terms". Practically this means that new quarries and mines can operate in virtually any part of Zone III, including also on critical habitats for a priority species of the 92/43 EC Directive. Using simple common sense, it is obvious that this is not compatible with the objectives of the 92/43 Directive.

The JMD is valid for two plus one years. After the expiring of this time period and based on comments and experience gained in between, it should be replaced with Presidential Decree. This offers some possibilities for improvement of the controversial points but also the danger of worst terms of protection. Will this time interval be used positively for the protection of western Milos? This is something on which we should focus our efforts in order to achieve it.

* You can download the full text of the JMD (in Greek) and the accompanying maps from the SHH webpage www.elerpe.org

Red Data Book of threatened animals of Greece

With a significant delay of many years, since the previous Red Data Book that addressed only vertebrates was published in 1992, has started the update and new edition of the Red Data Book of the threatened animals of Greece. The Red Data Book is expected to be published by summer 2008 and will also include information on invertebrates. The project is overseen by the Hellenic Zoological Society and is funded by the OP "Environment" with co-funding of the EC-EFRD. The Societas Hellenica Herpetologica is actively involved in the assessment of reptile and amphibian species and we will keep you informed on the developments.

Both the evaluation process itself and the relevant experience gained by SHH during the relatively recent (2006) publication of "The status and distribution of reptiles and amphibians of the Mediterranean basin" (<http://www.iucn.org/dbtw-wpd/edocs/2006-027.pdf> (1,27 MB)) is expected to be very valuable also for the Greek level.

Panagiota Maragou
WWF Greece
p.maragou@wwf.gr

Rare freshwater turtle rediscovered in Cambodia

One of the largest and less known freshwater turtles was discovered in Cambodia raising hopes that this threatened species can be saved from extinction. In an expedition along the Mekong river researchers from Conservation International, WWF, the Cambodian Fisheries Administration and the Cambodian Turtle Conservation Team found several individuals of *Pelochelys cantorii*, Cantor's giant soft-shell turtle. They also found a nesting ground for the species and brought back eggs that hatched in the lab. The hatchlings were released into the wild together with another adult turtle and additional juveniles captured by fishermen locally.

The Cantor's giant soft-shell turtle does not have a shell. Instead it has a rubbery skin with ribs fused together to form a protective layer over the internal organs. To protect itself from predators, it spends 95% of its life hidden in sand or mud with only its eyes and nose showing. It can grow up to 2m and weight more than 50 kilos. It possesses

long claws and jaws powerful enough to crush bone. It is a predator that extends its neck with lightning speed, faster even than the famous cobras.



© David Emmett / CI Cambodia

The species was last observed in the wild in Cambodia in 2003. There are some records from Laos and it appears extinct from Vietnam and Thailand. It is classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. It is threatened by hunting for its meat and eggs as well as by habitat destruction from dams, irrigation and dredging. This new population was discovered in an almost virgin part of the Mekong River with tall riverine forest and a lot of islands. The area had been closed for many years to scientific exploration because it was

one of the last strongholds of Cambodia's former Khmer Rouge regime.

For the future conservation of the species, Conservation International, WWF and the Cambodian Turtle Conservation Team plan to employ local community members as wardens to prevent illegal fishing of the species prized as an expensive delicacy in neighbouring Vietnam.

More information: Chris Greenwood, WWF Cambodia, Tel: + 855 092 916 454, E-mail: chris.greenwood@wwfgreatermekong.org

Three new species of salamander

They were discovered in a remote forest reserve in Costa Rica, during a scientific expedition of The Natural History Museum of London to Central America. This discovery raises the number of Costa Rican salamanders to 43.

Some 300 species of salamander are known around the world, mainly from the Northern Hemisphere, but there have been few new additions: in 1998 five new salamander species were found in a tropical area in Mexico.

From the new species two belong to the nocturnal *Bolitoglossa* genus while the third belongs to the *Nototriton* family and is a dwarf salamander growing to no more than 3cm. These three species, new to science, were found in La Amistad National Park, on the Costa Rica-Panama border. It is a largely unexplored area. Scientists believe the region is a centre for diversity as it is thought to be home to some two-thirds of all Costa Rica's native species, including hundreds of birds, mammals, reptiles and other amphibians, as well as plants.



The *Bolitoglossa* species has a vivid red band on its dorsal part.

The new species will be named and catalogued by scientists of the Costa Rica University. The Natural History Museum cooperates with scientists and officials from the two countries (Costa Rica and Panama) and the project is funded by the UK Darwin Initiative.

Source: BBC NEWS: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/science/nature/7170205.stm>

Scientific Congresses

1st Mediterranean Herpetological Congress

The 1st Mediterranean Herpetological Congress took place in Marrakech, Morocco from 16 to 20 April 2007. The title of the Congress was: "Biodiversity and management of the natural heritage" and it was held at the Faculty of Sciences, Semailia, of the University Cadi Ayyad. The programme comprised subjects as amphibian and reptile's taxonomy, palaeontology, morphology, behaviour, physiology and reptile conservation, as well as subjects on the amphibians and reptiles of Africa.

From Greece only one poster was presented on the morphometric analysis of the Common Chameleon and the African Chameleon.

There was an available post congress tour at Ouarzazate, east of the High Atlas Mountain. We crossed the arid steppe-land of Haous plain and through the High Atlas Mountains we went to the sub-desert lands of the High Atlas southern slope. At the area there are 6 amphibian, 2 tortoise, 14 lizard and 8 snake species. The participants searched the semi desert lands and found the following species: *Bufo mauritanicus*, *Rana saharica*, *Testudo graeca*, *Agama impalearis*, *Uromastix acanthinurus*, *Chamaeleo chamaeleon*, as well as species of the genus *Acanthodactylus*.



The species *Agama impalearis* lives on the ground as well as on low walls and bushes that climbs skilfully (photo M. Dimaki).

Maria Dimaki
The Goulandris Natural History Museum
mdim@gnhm.gr

6th Symposium on the Lacertids of the Mediterranean Basin

As we had informed you in our previous newsletter the 6th Symposium on the Lacertids of the Mediterranean basin will be organized at Lesvos island, Greece on 23-27 June 2008. The Symposium is organized and sponsored by the University of the Aegean, the Dept. of Biology of the University of Athens, the Prefectural Authority of Lesvos and the *Societas Hellenica Herpetologica*.

The Symposium will focus on different aspects concerning Mediterranean Lacertidae species. The agenda is still under consideration but in general the following thematic sessions can be indicated: Systematics & Evolution, Conservation & Biodiversity. It will include oral presentations, poster sessions and plenary lectures by the invited speakers Prof. Jonathan Losos (Harvard University), Prof. Erik Svensson (University of Lund) and Dr. Shai Meiri (Imperial College). Round Table Discussions will also be organised. Themes proposed up to now include "Conservation of endangered and isolated populations and species" and "Describing new-old species: a brave shake in the Systematics of Lacertids".

Following an agreement between the Editors of *Amphibia-Reptilia*, the peer-reviewed scientific journal of the *Societas Europaea Herpetologica* (current impact factor: 0.795, the same as Journal of Herpetology and almost the same as Copeia) and the Organizing Committee, the most outstanding but also of general relevance for herpetology contributions presented in the meeting will be published (following a review process) in a regular issue of the Journal together with the regular papers to appear in A-R (there will be no special issue), and introduced by a Preface article highlighting the importance and the novelty of the various contributions for the international studies of lizard biology. The papers that will not be included in this peer-reviewed Amphibia-Reptilia issue will be published in a separate volume, edited by the congress editorial office.

Professional Registration Fee by March 31, 2008 is 90 €. After March 31, 2008 the registration fee will be 120 €. Student fee is 40 €. Registration fee covers: the volume of abstracts; welcome party; Symposium Banquet; coffee breaks; shuttle transport from Mytilini Airport to Molyvos; and excursion to Fossil Forest of Sigri and in the coastal city of Eressos; and the volume of the Conference Proceedings. The Fee for accompanying person covers all the costs listed above, except for the volume of abstracts and the proceedings of the Conference.

For more information you can contact the members of the Symposium's organising Committee Stratis Valakos (evalakos@biol.uoa.gr) and Panagiotis Pafilis (pafilis@aegean.gr).

Questions and quiz

In SHH we often receive questions on reptile and amphibian behavior. Friends and members also send photos of reptiles they could not identify the species. With this Newsletter we start a new section with questions and answers and a recognition quiz. The questions will also appear in our website www.elerpe.org (currently only in Greek). The answer to the quiz will also appear in our website, shortly after the publication of the newsletter and also in the next issue.

What is this? This snake was observed in Panorama, Thessaloniki, Northern Greece on a gate (photo Xatzipetrou E.)



You can send your answers to elerpe@nhmc.uoc.gr

Do snakes make nests? Snakes use holes or hide under rocks to protect themselves. We cannot say that they are making permanent nests.

Is it correct that vipers are found only in limestone? No there is no specific relation between vipers and limestones. Do not forget that the Milos Viper is found on volcanic soils.