

Defying Destiny

Burmese Mountain Tortoise Breeding & Research



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A member of the Turtle Survival Alliance



Monday, July 21, 2003

Duval man strives to keep rare breed alive.

Burmese mountain tortoises hatch, develop in his care.

By Jessie-Lynne Kerr
Times-Union staff writer

In a homemade rain forest in Mandarin, Vic Morgan is defying destiny.

So far this summer, the Jacksonville resident is the proud "father" of 28 babies, and some of the remaining 20 eggs laid by his female Burmese mountain tortoise are expected to hatch soon. Morgan, 55, said he is doing his part to prevent the extinction of the *manouria emys* species of tortoise.



Vic Morgan offers a stalk of celery to the female of the mating pair of Burmese mountain tortoises. His home has become a sanctuary for the tortoises, some of which nest under old truck toppers.

Morgan, 55, said he is doing his part to prevent the extinction of the *manouria emys* species of tortoise. A member of the Turtle Survival Alliance, Morgan is among a small group of hobbyist breeders worldwide developing what are called assurance colonies for the endangered species.

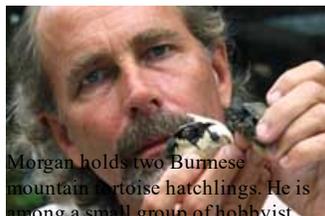
Asian turtles like the Burmese mountain tortoise are in danger of being wiped out, Morgan explained, because of the massive numbers being captured for the China market, where they are used for food and traditional medicine.

"If that isn't bad enough," he said, "turtles also are losing their habitat because of farming, logging and fires. And in the wild, 90 percent of the eggs are eaten by predators before they hatch."

Former President of the Jacksonville Herpetological Society, Morgan bought his first pair of Burmese mountain turtles in 1988.

"I didn't know a lot about them and there wasn't much written about them at the time," he said. Captive breeding began only about 20 years ago, he added.

Much of his early success was through trial and error. The first year, he said, only eight of the 40 eggs hatched, and few survived.



Morgan holds two Burmese mountain tortoise hatchlings. He is among a small group of hobbyist breeders worldwide developing what are called assurance colonies for the species.

So the next year, Morgan got

elaborate and obtained an incubator used for human babies. "I killed all the eggs," he said, sheepishly. The next year, 36 of the 40 eggs hatched.

"By the third year of egg laying, I pretty much had a handle on incubation and handling," he said.



Vic Morgan holds a week-old Burmese mountain tortoise. Since 1991, his turtles have produced about 400 offspring in his homemade rain forest.



An endangered Burmese mountain tortoise hatches Wednesday at Vic Morgan's home in Mandarin. In Asia, the tortoises are captured for food and traditional medicine and are losing their habitat to farming, logging and fires.

Morgan since has written papers on the care and feeding of the Burmese mountain tortoise. If he sells a pair, the purchaser gets full instructions on what and how much to feed the young turtles and how to have them wormed and de-parasited. There's a regular schedule for worming, he added. John Behler, curator in the herpetology department at The Bronx Zoo in New York, said one of the ways to conserve the endangered turtle population is with the development of assurance colonies such as those being maintained and promoted by Morgan.

"The global turtle crisis began in the early 1990s when China achieved new wealth and all of a sudden these animals were being gathered in large numbers and shipped to market," Behler said. "Southeast Asia is literally being swept clean of its wild turtle stock. Tons of turtles a day are being smuggled to markets."

Morgan was involved with the Turtle Survival Alliance in a massive turtle rescue that began in December 2001 when a shipment of 4 1/2 tons of live turtles being smuggled into Hong Kong was confiscated. The alliance got a major airline to ship them by air freight to South Florida. Among the more than 7,000 turtles in various states of illness were 63 Burmese mountain turtles.

"It was just amazing that any of them would still be alive," Morgan said. "They were all very sick and we got veterinarians to treat them. It was a great learning experience for me." Morgan was able to place the surviving Burmese from the shipment in assurance colonies.



This Burmese mountain tortoise is about 30 years old and is the mother of Vic Morgan's recent hatch of 28 babies.

He will take some of the babies to sell at the National Reptile Breeders Expo in Daytona Beach next month.

Morgan realizes he won't live to see the ultimate fruits of his labors. Experts say it could take up to 100 years to see if the captive breeding of the endangered species in assurance colonies will be successful so that the turtles can be restocked in their native habitat.

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