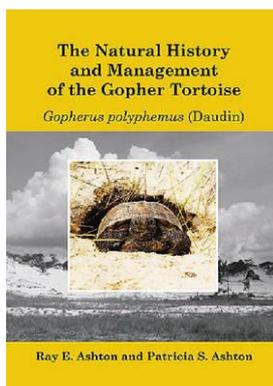


Book review



ASHTON, R.E. & P.S. ASHTON, 2008. The natural history and management of the Gopher Tortoise - *Gopherus polyphemus* (Daudin)

288 pages, 109 b/w photos, 1 distribution map, 13 figures, 45 tables, bound

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Discussing a book written by authors you know, is not easy. During several visits to the USA between 2001 and 2008 I had the privilege of meeting Ray and Pat Ashton. The first time I met them at a meeting on relocation and translocation of tortoises held at the Ashton Biodiversity Research & Preservation Institute in Florida. I found them to be dedicated and motivated tortoise specialists with a passion for Gopher tortoises. I have followed their numerous publications on Gopher tortoises, and I consider them to be Mr. and Mrs. Gopher tortoise.

A background of many years of Gopher tortoise conservation does not automatically mean that writing a book on the species is a "piece of cake". Apart from the authors, the editor, publisher, and printer play a role in the process between writing and publishing. Not being a Gopher tortoise specialist myself, although well acquainted with turtles in general during my now 31 years in the Rotterdam zoo, examining a book on this particular species is complicated. Questions arise such as "is all this information true, are all fourteen pages of cited references relevant and were they actually used?" After reading this book, and to be honest this took me a few weeks, I became a bit confused. This book is based on many years of experience, practical as well as theoretical, but in particular it shows the couple's passion and devotion to the species. The book contains in-depth detailed instructions of how to succeed in the field with respect to searching, excavating burrows and handling the tortoises. The volume also provides very detailed information on the species' natural

history and biology, habitat, nutrition, and reproduction. Furthermore, land management and conservation of the species is discussed and advice is given to land owners, researchers, law enforcement officers and state authorities on improvement to these topics.

This book occasionally gives the impression that it is written for dummies because of the amount of detail included for many of the issues discussed. As well, on a number of topics an overload of irrelevant information is given. A few examples: "courtship and mating was caught on videotape by one author and photographed by the other author, p. 22"; "the videotape ran out and part of the courtship was not recorded or seen because another tape had to be obtained, p.22"; "time periods of bobbing behaviour was measured by using a wrist watch, p. 23"; "plan your location carefully. Have a place close by, near restaurants, and where you can renew fuel, ice and drinks, p. 177". There are many such examples found in the book, and it looks as if the authors intended to write an extremely detailed protocol for all sorts of workers on how to carry out field research in relation to protection and conservation of the Gopher Tortoise. But again, this certainly illustrates the immense experience, extensive knowledge, motivation and passion of the authors.

With respect to the contents and text, I encountered quite a large number of mistakes, outdated information and errors. On page 8 the old names *Geochelone elephantopus* (currently *G. nigra*) and *Geochelone gigantea* (currently *G. dussumieri*) are used. On page 21 the information on courtship

gathered by the authors is not in table 1.6 where such data are summarized. On page 24 nest temperatures of 27-31°C are mentioned without referring to the phenomenon of temperature dependent sex determination during incubation, which is extremely important to know when resorting to artificial hatching – resulting in males at low and females at high temperatures. On pages 26-28, a large number of predators are listed in the text as well as in table 1.7; a bit of overkill in my opinion. Numerous photos, unfortunately all in black-and-white presumably for financial reasons, are included. Many photos are of a poor quality and lack focus thus not illustrating the associated text. On pages 38 and 45 the same photo is printed. On page 15 in photo 1.13 the egg tooth mentioned, can hardly be distinguished because the photo lacks focus. On page 19, photo 1.19, carapaces of dead tortoises are used to explain the gender distinction – why not use live specimens? On page 17 the text saying, “a more dome shaped carapace replaces the flattened carapace of the juvenile” refers to photo 1.16 in which this cannot be seen. In chapter 5 the numbering of tables and figures is swapped, thus both item types are incorrectly numbered. Quite a lot of text on specific topics is also included in tables on the same pages, causing information to be presented twice; in my view it would have been better to mention specific, limited information in the text and give a more extended overview in the tables.

The book includes 368 references. An appendix lists 1103 species (376 genera in 83 families) on which the Gopher Tortoise

forages. The volume further contains 45 tables and 13 figures. The management techniques discussed in this book regarding a number of issues such as translocations of wild populations can certainly be used for other tortoise conservation projects elsewhere in the world. Captive breeding, however, is not discussed, so the reader will not find breeding recipes. Regarding behaviour, health and veterinary issues and nutrition in the wild much attention is paid.

For those readers interested in conservation of *Gopherus polyphemus* the text contains a huge number of recommendations, tips and information with respect to field research. The information overload sometimes makes it difficult to shift the relevant from the irrelevant. The large number of errors, textual duplication, typos, and flawed photos, take away from the readability of this book. For these aspects the authors are probably not to blame. With some extra attention to editing, photos and layout, this book certainly would have increased in value as a scientific resource.

The general conclusion: for those working with the species in the field or in captivity, or active in protection and conservation or planning to do so, this book is certainly a must-read. Through the in-depth discussion of a large number of issues a positive impression of the complexity of the status of the species in the wild, and the need for proper management and protection of the species and its habitat is gained. Until now I have not read a detailed book such as this on tortoise conservation in all its aspects.

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As this review was written a considerable time ago, nomenclatural changes occurring in the intervening years could not be taken into consideration by the author. To respect the integrity of the text, we publish the original phrasing.

In memory of Henk Zwartepoorte

In 2016, just after arriving in Australia for a herpetological trip, the author very unexpectedly died. Almost all of the Pod@rcis editors knew Henk, some of us for a considerable time, and several on occasion had the pleasure of co-authoring his papers. He was very open to all interested in herps, professionals and amateurs alike, and well-respected internationally for his extensive knowledge of especially the Testudines. We all miss him and extend our condolences to his partner Mary.

Herman in den Bosch, for the editorial team.