

12:00 pm to 1:00 pm – lunch banquet and banquet speaker:

Tomas Diagne “The Tortoise Village in Senegal and Saving Endangered Turtles in Africa”



Tomas Diagne with some of his African Spurred tortoises at The Tortoise Village in Senegal. Photo courtesy of the Rolex Awards / Eric Vandeville.

Senegal’s Tortoise Specialist Takes a Wider View

Tomas Diagne, chosen as an Associate Laureate in 1998 for his project to open a breeding and protection centre for threatened tortoises, continues to work to save these fascinating reptiles. The 15-hectare centre, which in 2001 became the Noflaye Tortoise Village, 35 kilometres from Dakar and home to over 600 specimens of five regional species – including *Geochelone sulcata*, Africa’s largest land tortoise – attracts about 8,000 visitors each year.

Between 2004 and 2007, Diagne also played a key role in establishing a 260-hectare nature reserve for tortoises, fish and manatees in a marshy area of northern Senegal. But this tortoise specialist strongly believes that a broader perspective, one encompassing the entire continent, is now needed to ensure the tortoises’ survival.

“Since 2003, I have conducted several studies to assess the state of tortoise populations and their habitats in Mauritania, Guinea Bissau, Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo, Ghana, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” the Associate Laureate explains. “We don’t have enough raw data, and because of this most African species [of tortoise] are not adequately covered by the national and international laws enacted to protect them. They are at risk of disappearing without our even noticing.”

An acknowledged expert in the field, Diagne was invited in 2006 to take part in the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Specialist Group on Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles. At 35, he is youngest member and the first from West Africa. He is currently working on the forthcoming publication of an encyclopaedia and a series of field guides to African tortoises.

He is also raising funds to set up a research institute for tortoise study and conservation. He has already acquired a 1.5-hectare plot of land to build the institute. "Saving the tortoises is a huge challenge that requires great experience and understanding of the local context. It takes time and much patience. There is no magic solution," Diagne says.

See <http://rolexawards.com/en/the-laureates/tomasdiagne-the-project.jsp>