

Tortoise war comes to a slow boil as fanciers stick their necks out

Michael Durham

NATURE, red in tooth and claw, usually makes an exception of the humble tortoise. But war has broken out among the tortoises, terrapins and turtles. It is not the animals themselves, but Britain's tiny band of tortoise lovers who are at each other's throats.

The normally tranquil world of chelonia — tortoise, turtle and terrapin keeping — is in turmoil because of a dispute which has so far involved bitter allegations of unprofessional conduct, four libel writs, resignations, dark hints of forged documents and, supposedly, even the suicide of a leading tortoise expert. The three rival clubs which advise Britain's 10,000 tortoise lovers are now bracing themselves for a court case which has split the pet world. The outcome, however, could be some way off: lawyers, like tortoises, are not the swiftest movers.

The dispute began two years ago when a small Dutch animal lovers' magazine, *De Schildpads* (The Tortoise, circulation 400) published an article — in Dutch — which referred in unflattering terms to Andy Highfield, a prominent British tortoise expert and founder of the 1,800-member Tortoise Trust.

Mr Highfield, a conservationist and animal photographer, perceived a libel. Although few British tortoise



Battle lines: The three rival tortoise organisations.

lovers could have read the article, he set about tracing the source of the slur. The finger, he believed, pointed at leading members of the British Chelonia Group, a rival club with 1,500 members.

Writs for libel were issued against three leading British Chelonia Group members. But far from retreating within its shell, the BCG has decided to fight back. To the dismay of some of its supporters, it has since spent more than £11,000 to defend the case.

And the war has escalated. Forbidden by the Charity Commission to spend further funds on behalf of individual members, the BCG issued an appeal for legal costs. The author of the appeal, Dr Martin Lawton, a prominent vet, may have been ill-advised. He, too, has received a libel writ from Mr Highfield.

Meanwhile, tragedy struck. The tortoise world was shocked

by the suicide of one of its leading academic experts, Dr Oliphant Jackson, the BCG's chairman, who shot himself shortly after the dispute began.

And as if libel, professional backbiting and suicide were not enough, there are hints of further skulduggery. The BCG is believed to be pinning part of its defence on allegations that key documents in the case were forged on BCG headed notepaper. Tortoise lovers, some of whom have been driven to resign from membership of the BCG, are dismayed.

'I'm in it for the tortoises,' said one enthusiast who remains a member of both the BCG and the Tortoise Trust. 'This whole thing is a huge waste of time, money and energy. Why line solicitors' pockets when the money could be used for the welfare of animals?'

The tortoise groups have never stayed in hibernation for long. Relations between the

BCG and the Tortoise Trust have been frosty ever since the Trust was started as a splinter group in 1986.

Four years ago, tortoise wars erupted again when Diana Pursall, the then BCG chairman, resigned in a dispute over shell rot and tortoise runny nose syndrome. She formed a third group, the British Association of Tortoise Keepers, which is also competing for members.

The latest issue of tortoise welfare to divide their keepers is whether or not they are prone to tortoise Aids. According to Mr Highfield, the theory could account for thousands of deaths in America; others claim the deaths are more likely to be due to environmental factors.

Mr Highfield said last night he did not want to inflame the row further. 'Various matters are in dispute and action is still pending. It's a small world and people tend to get very worked up,' he said.

Dutch-born Henni Fenwick, one of the BCG leaders who has received a writ, yesterday warned *The Observer*: 'You are not to use my name in this story.'

The British Association of Tortoise Keepers, meanwhile, is keeping its hard hat on. 'We've done our best to keep out of it,' said Brian Pursall. 'We think some of the people involved are more interested in the politics of it all than what they are trying to achieve.'

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