



THE DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL NEWSLETTER

Summer 2004
OUR 29TH YEAR

Our Goal: To assure the continued survival of viable populations of the desert tortoise throughout its range.

DTC'S HANDLING, MONITORING & SURVEYING WORKSHOP

November 6-7, 2004, Ridgecrest, California

Registration for the ever-popular DTC Annual Workshop will open August 14, 2004. On August 13, the workshop coordinators will send an e-mail notification to the first 100 people who have signed up to attend. The notification will contain the link for the workshop registration form that can be found on the Council's website:

www.deserttortoise.org

These first 100 will have until September 4, 2004 to send in their registration form and payment. After that date, we will begin to notify others on the waiting list if space is available. If you have any questions, please feel free to e-mail:

Bailey0714@earthlink.net

NOTE: Anyone not registered for the workshop will be turned away.

THERE WILL BE ABSOLUTELY NO WALK-INS AT REGISTRATION. You need to be registered before you make the trip to Ridgecrest. Remember, we are a nonprofit organization that is trying to make the registration process fair and easy for everyone involved.

DTC PRESENTED CONSERVATIONIST OF THE YEAR AWARD

In late February, 2004, DTC was presented with the "2004 Conservationist of the Year" award by The Western Section of The Wildlife Society at the Section's fiftieth anniversary awards banquet in Rohnert Park, California. The Desert Tortoise Council's mission and many achievements were listed and a plaque honoring the Council "**For Their Work To Assure The Survival Of Viable Populations Of The Desert Tortoise**" was presented, meeting with great applause from a packed banquet room. Accepting this prestigious award on behalf of the Council was DTC Board Member Tom Egan. *"The Council is honored to receive this award. We organize and coordinate these symposia and workshops because we feel that knowledgeable biologists and land managers are essential to the continued survival of viable Desert Tortoise populations in the wild."* Many thanks to Council Members Barbara Kermeen and Rhys Evans for their behind-the-scenes support work in promotion of this great honor for DTC.

The Wildlife Society (TWS), founded in 1937, is an international non-profit scientific and educational

www.deserttortoise.org

association dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education. Our mission is to enhance the ability of wildlife professionals to conserve diversity, sustain productivity, and ensure responsible use of wildlife resources for the benefit of society. The Wildlife Society encourages professional growth through certification, peer-reviewed publications, conferences, and working groups. Receiving an award from a professional society like The Wildlife Society is quite an honor!



Board Member Tom Egan accepting the award.

30TH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM IN TUCSON IN 2005

The Annual Symposium will return to Tucson for the 30th meeting. The dates are February 18 through 21. **Dates have been erroneously reported as February 25 through 28.** The Symposium will be held at the Radisson Hotel City Center, in downtown, 15 minutes from the airport, and 0.1 miles from Interstate 10. Tucson is also an easy 2-hour drive from the Phoenix airport. **Plan on being in Tucson in February, 2005!**

Hotel information can be found at:

<http://radisson.com/tucsonaz>

and information on Tucson can be found at:

<http://www.visittucson.org>

CONSERVATION NEWS

BLM Approves Northern and Eastern Mojave Desert Routes of Travel Plan

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved the decision record for the Northern and Eastern Mojave Desert (NEMO) Routes of Travel Plan, amending the 1980 California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan.

The Routes Plan updates previous route designations and adopts a network of motorized vehicle access routes as part of the CDCA Plan. In the network, 91 percent of existing routes are open in about 1.3 million acres of public lands in the area. The decision record is available on line at:

<http://www.ca.blm.gov/barstow/nemo.html>.

In December 2002, BLM issued a decision designating routes on 400,000 acres of public lands in this area within desert wildlife management areas. About one million acres of wilderness area are excluded from route designation since motorized vehicle use is prohibited by law in wilderness areas. With the designation of the remaining 1.3 million acres in the NEMO, route designations have now been accomplished for the NEMO planning area, theoretically consistent with the NEMO Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (2002).

For further information contact Edythe Seehafer at 760-252-6021 in the BLM's Barstow Field Office, California Desert District Office – 22835 Calle San Juan de Los Lagos, Moreno Valley, CA (909) 697-5200

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More Desert Tortoises Falling Prey to Pet Lovers

Looking to curb the declining population of the threatened desert tortoise, the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) reminds anyone who enjoys California's eastern desert regions that it is illegal to remove the slow-moving reptiles from their natural habitat.

Additionally, CDFG cautions pet owners who grow weary of their domestic tortoises not to release the reptiles into the southern California desert. Released tortoises have a low survival rate and can spread disease within the dwindling tortoise population.

"This is tortoise-activity season, the time of year when they've emerged from their burrows and can find good vegetation and water," said Rebecca Jones, an environmental scientist with CDFG's Eastern Sierra-Inland Desert Region. "This is also the season, usually late May to July, when they lay eggs."

Jones warned that one of the growing problems for the shrinking numbers of desert tortoises is that people find the dome-shelled reptile and decide to take them home.

"People collect them from the desert, thinking that they'd make good pets," Jones said. "These animals are protected under the California and the federal Endangered Species Act, and yet we get up to 40 calls a year from people who say they've found one and asking what should they do with it."

California's desert tortoise population appears to be in rapid decline throughout the west Mojave, east Mojave and Colorado deserts. The tortoise, which can weigh up to 15 pounds and reach 15 inches in length, survives in parts of southwest Utah,

Nevada, Arizona and northern Mexico. Research shows that even populations that were thought to be stable or increasing a decade ago are now also in decline.

Scientists have studied the population and habitats of desert tortoises (*Gopherus agassizii*) for decades, using carefully placed study plots in the heart of tortoise habitat. Beginning in the 1970s, scientists established 27 study plots to help monitor California's tortoise population.

Jones said the plots are invaluable because they give environmental scientists data sets to analyze demographic attributes of tortoises, health and disease in tortoises, changes in vegetation and anthropogenic impacts. Since monitoring began, there has been a decrease in some populations of nearly 90 percent. Some areas that once had healthy populations of 250 tortoises per square mile now have fewer than 10 per square mile, Jones said.

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Negotiate Draft Annual Funding Agreement for National Bison Range Complex

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) have negotiated a Draft Annual Funding Agreement for the National Bison Range Complex in Moeise, Montana. The agreement allows the CSKT to perform some of the USFWS activities at the Bison Range during Fiscal Year 2005. These activities include the biological program, fire program, maintenance program, and visitor services.

The Service will maintain ownership of and management authority over all lands and buildings at the Bison Range.

The draft agreement was negotiated under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. Under the Act, qualified Indian Tribes may request to perform activities on lands administered by the Department of Interior which are of geographic, historic, or cultural significance to the requesting tribe.

The draft agreement at the Bison Range follows another recent management agreement between U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments regarding tribally contracted activities in the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge of Alaska.

Notice of the draft agreement will be published in the Federal Register soon. After publication, the public will have 90 days to comment on the draft agreement. The draft agreement may currently be obtained e at:

<http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/cskt-fws-negotiation>

The 90-day comment period will begin only after notice of the draft agreement has been published in the Federal Register.

Comments may be submitted via e-mail at:

draftafapubliccomments@fws.gov.

Following the public comment period and any subsequent revisions to the draft agreement, the final agreement will be signed by the Service and the CSKT, after which the agreement will be submitted to the U.S. Congress for a 90-day review period before it is implemented.

The start of a trend?

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Gopher Tortoise Petition

This is a letter sent by the Ashton Biodiversity Research and Preservation Institute to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The gopher tortoise is listed as threatened west of the Mobile and Tombigbee Rivers in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

Chief, Division of Endangered Species
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1875 Century Blvd., Suite 200
Atlanta, GA 30345

25 March 2004

RE: Petition to List the Florida population of *Gopherus polyphemus* (Gopher Tortoise)

The Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative is a program of the Ashton Biodiversity Research and Preservation Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to research, conservation, and education. As knowledgeable researchers and President and Research Advisor to this organization, we are writing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to nominate the gopher tortoise, *Gopherus polyphemus*, within the state of Florida as a candidate for federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.

There are many indications that this species and its habitat are being decimated at rates far greater than stated in the Florida Freshwater Fish and Game Commission (FWC) staff report entitled "Petition to Reclassify the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) as a Threatened Species in Florida." This petition that was submitted to the FWC in late 2003 is attached.

The reasons we believe this petition is required are as follows:

1. Development rates based on County records and protection by FWC.

A Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative survey taken last year from general development related permits, zoning changes, GIS mapping and other data provided by county governments in Florida indicated that the most counties with *G. polyphemus* populations and appropriate upland habitats are being developed at a far greater rate than stated in the FWC petition. In a majority of counties, from Marion County south, most of the available uplands are likely to be developed within the next 20 years. Under state regulations, less than 10% of this development is scrutinized or permitted by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Twelve counties have local ordinances that lead to scrutiny of permits or conduct on site inspections to determine the possibility of tortoises or other protected species existing on lands being permitted for clearing.

In addition to these massive land use changes, there is even greater potential loss of tortoises and tortoise habitat on the remaining agricultural lands. Agricultural lands are essentially exempt from state protected species regulations, even though these lands continue to provide habitat for considerable populations of tortoises. Agricultural lands (including silviculture) are being sold for development at an alarming rate.

2. Status of populations on federal and state conservation lands.

Surveys on state lands (McCoy, Stys, and Mushinsky 2002) have shown a marked decline in gopher tortoises on state and federally managed lands over the past 10 years. Similarly GTCI has surveyed many FWC mitigation lands purchased for tortoise conservation and found that the vast majority of these lands are not being managed properly for this species. In some cases the land is marginal habitat at best. A review of management plans (2001-present) for the state CARL (Florida Forever) lands being managed by the state Department of Forestry show that they have given

little or no attention to the habitat management needs for this or other listed species except for the red-cockaded woodpecker.

Recent Federal rule changes by executive order and some federal legislation regarding management of U.S. forests and military lands could lead to further destruction of tortoise populations on government lands.

Years of effort to protect resources including protected species appear to be in great jeopardy. Similarly, state lands purchased under the state conservation lands programs are generally managed by the Florida Dept of Forestry. The lack of monitoring of protected species, lack of knowledge on how to manage for protected species, and conflicting roles (management for protected species and biodiversity versus silviculture) have led to poor management and loss of habitat and populations of gopher tortoises.

3. Lack of change in FWC regulations, rules, and guidelines.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has had difficulty in creating a statewide management plan for the gopher tortoise and appropriate rules and regulations that protect the tortoise and encourage the general public to support this protection. The impact of this failure to issue a management plan goes beyond the gopher tortoise and extends to many other state and federally listed species that have been listed as commensals that live within the gopher tortoise's burrow. These include the federally listed Eastern Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon corias couperi*) and state listed species such as the Florida burrowing owl, the Florida mouse, and a wide variety of invertebrates that are only known from gopher tortoise burrows.

4. Public attitude and concern is growing regarding "Take."

There is a growing negative attitude on the incidental take rule and how it is being handled with the development industry and private citizens, particularly in regards to how "Incidental Take" is implemented. Citizen outcry and community actions have led to unregulated efforts to save and relocate tortoises. This has resulted in tortoises being unofficially relocated at a rate far greater than currently permitted by the state. At least three counties have passed rules in the past three years to limit or halt the "take" of gopher tortoises.

In a poll by GTCI in October 2000 conducted of 1,492 citizens living in tortoise habitat, it was found that private citizens are relocating thousands (estimated at more than 50,000) of tortoises every year. This is despite the public's knowledge that it is illegal under state law. The most frequently expressed attitude was a feeling of total frustration and disenfranchisement. These citizens commonly take the tortoises to federal and state forests and parks. This is leading to a growing demand on the part of animal rights groups and concerned citizens that all tortoises be protected and now local ordinances are beginning to demonstrate this desire.

The gopher tortoise should be considered as a candidate species for future listing. We firmly believe that this species and many of its commensals meet the criteria for threatened status. Without federal protection this species is destined for ultimate extinction. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ray E. Ashton, Jr.
ABRPI President

Richard Franz
ABRPI Research Advisor

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U.S. Department of Interior Announces \$21 Million in Grants to States

Interior Secretary Gale Norton announced that the Department is awarding \$21 million in challenge cost-share grants to complete 377 conservation projects with states, local communities, businesses, landowners, and other partners. The grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service will fund a wide range of conservation projects.

A state-by-state breakdown of the grants announced by Norton today is available at the Interior Department Web site:

www.doi.gov/cci/.

One of the grants will go to the BLM in Las Vegas to restore desert tortoise habitat. The BLM will be contributing \$138,000, with the following partners providing an additional \$138,000: Boy Scouts of America, Clark County, Community Service Volunteers, Outside Las Vegas, and Partners in Conservation.

**2002/2003 PROCEEDINGS
AVAILABLE**

The Symposium Proceedings for the 2002 and 2003 annual symposium have been published as a single volume. The cost is \$10 for members and \$16 for non-members. Ordering information is available on our web page. Because of declining sales and fewer papers submittals, this could possibly be the last printed proceedings volume. The Board is exploring other options for the symposium proceedings.

DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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PATAGONIA ENVIRONMENTAL GRANTS

Patagonia, the outdoor clothing company, provides funding for environmental work. They support small, grassroots activist organizations with provocative direct-action agendas. They look for innovative groups that produce measurable results, and like to support efforts to force the government to abide by its own laws. They help local groups working to protect local habitat, and believe the individual battles to protect a specific stand of forest, stretch of river, or indigenous species are the most effective in raising more complicated

issues in the public mind, particularly those of biodiversity and ecosystem protection. Because they're a privately held company, they have the freedom to fund groups off the beaten track, and believe the small grants are most effective there.

Program priorities include: biodiversity, forests, media/ publications, resource extraction, social activism, sustainable agriculture, and water/marine protection. Eligible applicants include nonprofit organizations. Grants range from \$3,000 to \$8,000. For further information, go to:

http://www.patagonia.com/enviro/enviro_grants.shtml

They do not fund: general environmental education efforts, research, unless it is in direct support of a developed plan for specific action to alleviate an environmental problem, land acquisition, endowment funds, political campaigns, organizations without 501(c)3 status.

GRANT INFORMATION

The following web page has a searchable list for various types of grants:

<http://www.redlodgeclearinghouse.org/resources/search.asp>



Desert Tortoise Council
c/o Doug Duncan
P.O. Box 331
Tucson, AZ 85702

Check one: MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL _____ CHANGE OF ADDRESS _____

DATE: _____ EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

NAME: _____ PHONE: _____

(Please Print)(Include Area Code)

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP CODE: _____

____ Regular (**\$15.00** per year)

____ Organization (\$55.00 per year)

____ Contributing (\$50.00 per year)

____ Lifetime (\$300 or more)

____ Student (**\$10.00** per year- Requires endorsement of student's advisor or Major Professor)

NEWSLETTER FORMAT:

____ Mailed paper copy ____ Pdf file via e-mail ____ E-mail notice for web page viewing

Make check or money order payable to Desert Tortoise Council and **send** with this application to:
Desert Tortoise Council, P.O. Box 5685 Sun City West, AZ 85376-5685

The Desert Tortoise Council does not release its membership list