

## DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

## NEWSLETTER

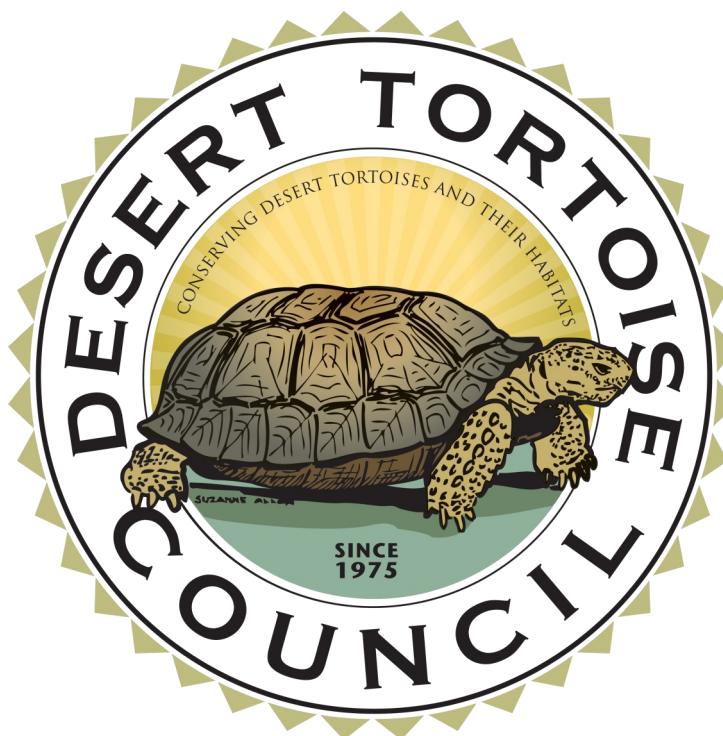
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## *Grassroots Efforts Tentatively Halt Luxury Hotel Development in Tortoise Territory*

By Eric Hamburg

Developers have proposed building a 106-room hotel, restaurant, wellness center and event space in Wonder Valley, an unincorporated community east of Twentynine Palms, California. After learning about this proposal in late 2021, local Wonder Valley residents and others throughout the Morongo Basin became concerned about the negative impacts of such a development — which would be the largest hotel in the Morongo Basin and totally unlike anything in the wide-open spaces of rural Wonder Valley.

Locals organized the Stop Wonder Inn Project (SWIP) group to research the proposal and to inform the community as to the facts and impacts of this development. Such a project needs to be approved by San Bernardino County and must conform to the

California Environmental Quality Act. SWIP found that while County Land Use Services determined that the project would have a “less than significant” impact, in many of the CEQA factors there would be quite a significant environmental impact. One of the most concerning CEQA environmental factors is Biological Resources. While the developers conducted a study that showed no presence of the desert tortoise on the project’s acreage, SWIP found that that study was not conducted according to required protocols nor at the right time of year. A credible independent alternative study was conducted conforming to required protocols and at the right time of year which documented a significant presence of desert tortoises in the area.



*Luke Basulto observes a desert tortoise hatchling within close proximity to the proposed development site.*

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## Letter from the Editor

Welcome to Issue 47, Volume 1 of the Desert Tortoise Council Newsletter.

In this issue, you'll find articles about community activism, an ordinary tortoise encounter, and more.

A feature on the Council's 2023 symposium and an announcement of the 2024 symposium are also included.

This issue spotlights our new staff member, David Hedrick, who

serves as the Council's Operations Manager.

Lastly, our back page announcements detail upcoming and recent events, including a call for 2024 symposium sponsors.

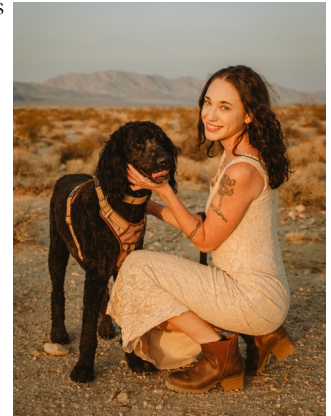
As always, follow us on social media to stay up to date on all things desert tortoise, including Council actions, courses offered, annual symposia, recovery efforts, and more.

We hope to see you in Las Vegas this February!

Cheers,

*Halle*

Halle Kohn-Levine  
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*I'm the one on the right.*

## Recap of the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Desert Tortoise Council Symposium

*By Mary Lane Poe*

ST. GEORGE, UTAH (February 22<sup>nd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, 2023) — On the doorstep of Zion National Park, nestled beneath the towering sandstone cliffs of southern Utah, the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Desert Tortoise Symposium was hosted in beautiful St. George, UT. St. George is uniquely situated at the convergence of the Great Basin, the Colorado Plateau, and

the Mojave Desert, making it a stand-out location for desert ecology. The area is known to host some of the densest numbers of desert tortoises in the range, as well as a wide variety of desert plants, reptiles, and birds. The area is home to the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve (including the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area) which protects over 60,000

acres of critical habitat for the continued survival of sensitive species, including the desert tortoise. Red Cliffs is also home to some of the most stunning scenery that southern Utah has to offer, with sweeping vistas of the Pine Valley Mountains, Snow Canyon State Park, and greater Zion.

The week kicked off with two field trips options that explored different zones within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve (RCDR). Hosted by Ann McCluckie (UDWR), Peter Woodman (DTC), Cameron Rognan (Washington Co. HCP) and Mike Schijf (Washington Co. HCP), participants hiked through wintery conditions to explore more of the RCDR and learn about its ecological diversity. Back in the warmth of the Dixie Convention Center, dedicated volunteers prepared for the arrival of this year's 230 Symposium attendees who had braved

historic winter storms as they navigated their way north to Utah. We are thankful that everyone arrived safe and sound.

The Symposium got off to a great start with a pre-conference mixer hosted by SNEI, who generously offered to sponsor this event again this year. The Council is appreciative of their support in helping the Symposium kick-off with a great social networking event; especially since the food was delicious, the drinks delightful, and the conversation stimulating!

After the welcome address and other announcements were made on Thursday morning, the presentations began with six engaging sessions. We heard from speakers about restoration efforts for desert tortoise habitat, issues concerning the effects of the Common Raven, and the value and challenges faced by



*Photos provided by Mary Lane Poe.*

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## *Grassroots Efforts Tentatively Halt Luxury Hotel Development in Tortoise Territory (continued)*

(Wonder Valley residents have also documented the presence of many desert tortoises on the land within proximity to the proposed hotel.) That study was submitted to the County. Prior to a meeting of the Planning Commission where the proposal was being considered, Land Use Services continued to consider that the proposal posed “less than significant”

impact.

At the San Bernardino County Planning Commission hearing on March 23, 2023, forty-seven desert residents went on record opposing the development and the Planning Commission voted unanimously to deny the project. This decision was based largely on their judgment that the proposal was inappropriate in the Wonder Valley area due to exist-

ing zoning designations and the lack of supporting public infrastructure. The developers have appealed this denial to the Board of Supervisors which will hold a hearing on the project on a date yet to be determined.

SWIP has written numerous analysis documents, available on their website, which have also been submitted to the five Supervisors and which are part of the public record. Throughout

SWIP's efforts they have, via their website, mailing list and social media, enabled the concerned public to submit letters to the County decision makers and hundreds of letters have been submitted.

You may submit your views on the project via the group's [web-site](#). Those interested in ongoing updates can also follow Stop Wonder Inn on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).

## *Recap of the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Desert Tortoise Council Symposium (continued)*



*Photo provided by Mary Lane Poe.*

nonprofit organizations in our industry. Winners of the 2023 Robert C. Stebbins Research Award were Kenro Kusumi and Greer Dolby, while the Power of Persistence Awards went to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Ann McCluckie and Richard Fridell, and Debra Hughson. After a full day of learning, participants headed back to their hotels to get ready for the evening festivities. We had a social networking dinner sponsored by the Council, followed by a movie screening of *The Good, The Bad and The Slow*, a film directed by

Hans Glasmann, MFAP Professor at Utah Tech University.

On Friday morning we began the first of five sessions for the day, including a special session titled “Cannabis Invasion: What We Need to Know and Do About It.” This session was extremely interesting and informative, with a wide range of speakers including the Honorable Fiona Ma, California State Treasurer, Deputy Kyle Schuler from the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, and Eric Weiss with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Participants learned about how the explosion of illegal cannabis grow operations in the Mojave Desert has quickly generated negative impacts on sensitive desert ecosystems. From increased crime in remote areas, chemicals and herbicides being littered throughout the desert, and an influx of grow-related trash and debris, this panel provided a comprehensive look into this new issue affecting our community. We would like to give a special thank you to all the speakers on this panel for sharing their insights and expertise on this subject at the Symposium.

The rest of the day was rounded out with other thought-provoking panels which included hearing about the augmentation and head-starting of desert tortoises, demography, connectivity and the effects of climate change, and a plenary address by Dr. Christopher Smith titled “Dust Storms Ahead: Climate

change, green energy development, and endangered species in the Mojave Desert.”

Next on the agenda were the Friday evening festivities, which are always sure to delight! We kicked off the evening with a beautiful dinner in the banquet hall at the Dixie Convention Center where attendees had the chance to interact with colleagues and friends, both new and old. The vibe was lively as the dinner wrapped up and we moved into our prestigious Awards Ceremony and the infamous Symposium Raffle! With Bruce Palmer at the microphone, we had the chance to honor scientists, educators and students in our community who are at the forefront of innovation, biology, and service. Margaret Fusari was awarded the Kristin H. Berry Annual Award, Judy Hohman was awarded the Glenn R. Stewart Service Award, Jacqueline Dougherty received the Linda J. Allison Memorial Grant, and Daniel Guerra won the David J. Morafka Memorial Research

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## Recap of the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Desert Tortoise Council Symposium (continued)

Award. Julia Joos was awarded 1<sup>st</sup> place for her student paper on comparative thermal ecology and activity patterns of three species of *Gopherus* tortoises. Justice Best won 2<sup>nd</sup> place for research on applications of remote sensing imagery obtained with unmanned aerial vehicles evaluating desert tortoise densities at local scales.

Next up, we got the chance to view this year's captivating images that were submitted to our annual photo contest. Best-in-show was awarded to Mike Schif for his photo depicting desert tortoise tracks dancing their way across a fragile and dehydrated playa. For our Banquet Address, we got the chance to view the

short film *Through the lens – A closer look at reptile behavior in southwest Utah*, created by local biologist Cameron Rognan. The footage shown absolutely captivated the audience with rare glimpses into intriguing behaviors, mating rituals, and predation by local critters including Gila monsters, Great Basin and sidewinder rattlesnakes, and desert tortoises.

The captivating raffle and auction followed, and we were blown away by all the incredible items up for auction this year including exotic treats, sturdy field gear, beautiful artwork, and gift cards. Some of our top-tier auction items included a 2-night

B&B stay at the amazing Sylvan Dale dude ranch in Colorado, a Hawk Walk with Sky Island Falconry Experience in Tucson, and an Apple Watch! Participating in the raffle and auction is such a fun experience for everyone involved and we are grateful to each person who solicited donations, helped organize and host the raffle, and who bid on items to support our amazing organization!

On Saturday morning we began our final panel with two more fantastic sessions discussing topics related to government activities and management actions to enhance tortoise recovery as well as strategies used to

evaluate effects of off-roading in the desert. We also heard more from local St. George biologists about different surveys, studies, and strategies to enhance desert tortoise protection throughout the Beaver Dam slope and the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit.

The Council wants to emphasize its sincere gratitude for those individuals and organizations that made the 48th Annual Symposium possible through their generous sponsorships. This year we received over \$15,000 in donations to help make this event better than ever. This event would also not be possible without the support from our non-profit partners and vendors, which you can find listed in the *Back Page An-*

## Desert Tortoise Council Hires David Hedrick as Operations Manager

### *Desert Tortoise Council (DTC) makes a new hire!*

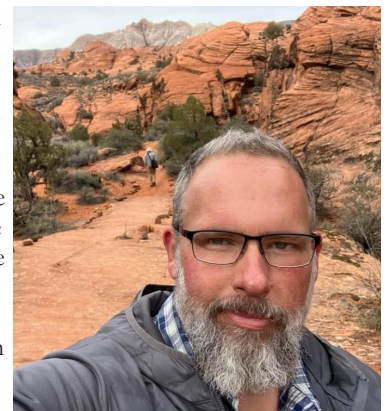
The DTC has hired long-time Turtle Survival Alliance team member David Hedrick as their Operations Manager. David will work with the DTC Board and volunteers to assist with a wide array of operations including



David holding a Bog Turtle Hatchling.

fundraising, virtual programming, event support, social media, and partnerships. He will also be involved in the organization and execution of the annual symposium and workshops! David has been looking under rocks since he could walk and has spent as much time in the water as out in the biodiverse Southern Appalachian region of East Tennessee where he grew up. During his seventeen years in zoo herpetology in Nashville and Chattanooga, he cared for and grew a collection of a broad range of species, also working with Hellbender Salamanders in zoos and in the field. Conservation social media began as a volunteer effort working with Caribbean Partners in Amphibian and Reptile

Conservation (CaribPARC) and Hellbender Conservation in the American South. For several years David grew the social media presence of the International Iguana Foundation and began doing the same for Turtle Survival Alliance in 2015. While with Turtle Survival Alliance, he managed the website and has been part of the team that brought the Annual Symposium on the Conservation and Biology of Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles to the world virtually and in-person. David is part of the TSA's Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion Committee and PARC's DEI Task Team. He has grown and organized conservation partnerships and events with breweries since 2012 and will continue that for DTC. You may have seen Da-



David in Snow Canyon State Park, Utah.

vid working with the DTC as a representative of TSA, helping run their virtual and hybrid symposiums and courses since 2020. He is excited to put his skills to use as part of the team working for the conservation of Desert Tortoises!



## Course & Workshop Announcements

### *Introduction to the Mojave Desert Tortoise*

By Dr. Margaret Fusari

#### **Desert Tortoise Council Presents the 2023 Introduction to the Mojave Desert Tortoise Course**

This course includes two half days of online lectures (Friday, October 27 & Saturday, October 28), a brief online quiz, and a full day of fieldwork in Ridgecrest, CA on EITHER Friday, November 3 or Saturday, November 4. Completion of all parts plus an online course evaluation will be required to receive certification of completion.

The online lecture course will be available to audit for personal information without any certification or other recognition of attendance.

The lectures will be on Zoom and take place on October 27 from 12 PM to 5 PM and October 28 from 9 AM to 2 PM, PDT.

A Field Workshop is required to complete the course and will be given in the field in Ridgecrest, CA, for one day, EITHER November 3 or November 4.

Details and the link to registration can be found on our [web-site](#).

For questions, please email [intro-course@deserttortoise.org](mailto:intro-course@deserttortoise.org)



*The Field Workshop portion of the 2022 Introduction to the Mojave Desert Tortoise Course. Photos courtesy of Ed LaRue.*

## Grant & Award Announcements

### *David J. Morafka Memorial Research Award Announcement*

The Desert Tortoise Council is now accepting applications for the 2024 David J. Morafka Memorial Research Award. The award was established, with the aid of several donors, to help support research that contributes to the understanding, management and conservation of tortoises of the genus *Gopherus* (*G. agassizii*, *G. morafkai*, *G. elegans*, *G. berlandieri*, and *G. flavomarginatus*) in the southwestern United States and Mexico. Applicants must be associated with a recognized institution (e.g., university, museum, government agency, non-governmental organization) and may be graduate students, post-doctoral students, or other re-



searchers.

Applications will be evaluated on the basis of the potential of the research to contribute to the biological knowledge of one or more of the above gopher tortoise species, and to their management and conservation. The \$2,500 award will be presented to the winning applicant at the Desert Tortoise Council's Annual Symposium in February 2024. Applications are due December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

Please visit the Desert Tortoise Council [website](#) for full information about the award, as well as application procedures and documents.

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## *Grant & Award Announcements (continued)*

### *Glenn R. Stewart Student Travel Fund*

The Desert Tortoise Council is now accepting applications for the Glenn R. Stewart Student

Travel Fund. This fund was established to support students working with North American



*Gopherus* tortoises by assisting with their travel costs to attend and participate at the 2024 Desert Tortoise Council Symposium. The fund will support up to \$500 (each) in travel costs for up to two students. Applicants must be enrolled in a recognized educational institution and may be a high school, undergraduate, graduate, or post-doctoral student. The student applicant must be a member of the Desert Tortoise Council, must present an

oral presentation or poster at the 2024 Symposium. Applications are due December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

Please visit the Desert Tortoise Council [website](#) for full information about the fund, as well as application procedures and documents.

For any specific questions about any of the available grants and awards, please [reach out to our Grants Committee](#).

## *Just a Tortoise from Last Night* By Luke Basulto

Last night was a gorgeous night out in the Joshua Tree, California. Cloudy, humid (for the desert), drizzly in some places nearby, and finally below 85F before 9PM. Despite the full moon, I decided to head out on a little night hike in one of my favorite areas just outside the park to look for snakes. As I was climbing around on this steep, rocky hillside full of large boulders, I found this big tortoise catching some Z's in a little cave.

I felt bad for waking it up and shining a light in its face, but as I got up off my belly and stepped back, I immediately tripped over my pack and fell about 15 feet back down the hillside into a rather large Jojoba bush. After I laid there for a moment cussing myself out in the moonlight, I pulled myself out of the bush, unwrapped the bag straps from around my feet, gave the Jojoba the rest of my water as a "sorry" and limped back to my car, accepting the fall as my penance for disturbing the wise old critter. Found a nice big tarantula after that but never did find any

snakes, however I am totally fine (*clumsy kid, been falling down desert hillsides my whole life*). Could've been worse but my partner knew where I was, and I had a friend meeting me there minutes later. But let me tell ya, seeing this old tortoise enjoying the relief of a cool night and moist air, in its sweet little cave overlooking the dim lights from the homes in South Joshua Tree below, and the lightning flashes from the summer storms in the distance, makes all the bumps and scratches hurt way less. Also took my mind off the York Fire and countless other shady projects and developments that constantly pull my attention, at least for a little while.

My sage advice, always tell someone where you are going and what you are doing, try your best NOT to trip over your pack, and if you find yourself about to cartwheel down a beginner's boulder problem, aim for the bushes. But also, remember to take some time for yourselves and appreciate the little things.....(like jojoba bushes and their strong roots).



## Back Page Announcements

### *Save the Date: 2024 Desert Tortoise Council Symposium*

The Desert Tortoise Council is pleased to announce that its 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting and Symposium will be held at South Point Hotel, Casino, and Spa in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The Symposium will be a hybrid event (both in-person and virtual attendance options) and

takes place between February 21 and 23, 2024.

The technical meeting, which will be presented on February 21, 22, and 23, will include a program that will be exciting, challenging, and full of new information!

Please mark your calendar for this event. We will update our members with any new information such as the dates for field trips and other activities as soon as they are available.

Visit our [website](#) in the coming weeks as event details are confirmed.



### *Saving Desert Tortoises From Extinction*

If you've been to any Desert Tortoise Council Symposia in the last several years, you're probably familiar with Hardshell Labs and its founder, Tim Shields.

[Hardshell Labs](#) has made great progress in raven repulsion techniques and is launching fundraising efforts to go even

further in their mission to help struggling desert tortoise populations.

Recently, Shields' work was featured by The New Yorker in their documentary "Eco-Hack!," which can be found on [The New Yorker website](#) as well as on [YouTube](#).

For those interested in sup-

porting the important work of Hardshell Labs, they can contribute to the [Project Hardshell Patreon](#).

Help us get across the threshold to a more sustainable desert ecosystem, one where juvenile tortoises can safely graze. Let's work together for a more sustainable future.



Thumbnail for the Eco-Hack!, Saving Desert Tortoises from Extinction YouTube video.

### Follow the Desert Tortoise Council:



### *Council Mission*

*The Desert Tortoise Council was established in 1975 to promote conservation of the desert tortoise in the deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico. The Council is a private, non-profit organization comprised of hundreds of professionals and laypersons who share a common concern for desert tortoises in the wild and a commitment to advancing the public's understanding of the species. For the purposes of the Council, desert tortoise includes the species complex in the southwestern United States and in Mexico, currently referred to as *Gopherus agassizii*, *Gopherus morafkai*, and *Gopherus evgoodei*.*

### *Board of Directors & Staff*

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Joe Probst, *Treasurer*  
Ed LaRue, *Recording Secretary*  
Becky Jones, *Corresponding Secretary*  
Halle Kohn, *Membership Coordinator*

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Margaret Fusari  
Peter Woodman  
Bruce Palmer  
Michael Tuma  
Ken MacDonald

Judy Hohman  
Max Havelka  
Mary Lane Poe  
Luke Basulto

#### **Webmaster**

Sky Esser

#### **Operations Manager**

David Hedrick

# Back Page Announcements

## *Sponsor the 2024 Desert Tortoise Council Symposium*

The Desert Tortoise Council would like to extend our gratitude to organizations who partner with us and sponsor our symposium year after year. We could not do this important work without you.

Please consider sponsoring the annual Symposium of the Desert Tortoise Council. This one-time donation will go directly to defraying the costs of the 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium.

Thank you to those listed below who were sponsors, vendors, and partners at our 2023 symposium.

Your generous [donations](#), [sponsorships](#), and partnerships are integral in every way to making

this world more habitable, wonderful, and rich with biodiversity for future generations.

We can't wait to see you again in 2024!

[Avantus Clean Energy](#)

[Bio Logical, LLC](#)

[Circle Mountain Biological Consultants, Inc.](#)

[Conserve Southwest Utah](#)

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[Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.](#)

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[Southern Nevada Environmental, Inc. \(SNEI\)](#)

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[Universal Engineering Services](#)

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Conserve  
Southwest  
Utah



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