



CONSERVING
DESERT TORTOISES
AND THEIR HABITATS

Desert Tortoise Council

Five-year Strategic Plan and Implementation Strategies 2025-2030

Approved January 17, 2025

Mission	To assure the perpetual survival of viable populations of desert tortoises represented throughout its historical range.
Five-year Vision	To expand the Council’s role advocating for science-based management of desert tortoises and to improve effectiveness as a leader in the conservation and protection of desert tortoises and their habitats.
Membership	Membership is open to any person or organization with an interest in desert tortoises or desert tortoise conservation.
Current Functions and Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To host annual symposia to share scientific data and disseminate information regarding desert tortoises. • To provide professional development through workshops on desert tortoise ecology, field techniques, and regulatory protection for the public and agency personnel. • To review and comment on proposed projects that may impact desert tortoise populations and habitats. • To serve as a resource for credible and current scientific information about desert tortoises. • To collaborate with agencies and organizations to provide recommendations to support the conservation and management of desert tortoises and their habitats. • To provide funding for the implementation of small-scale conservation projects.
Strategic Goals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To continue to be the primary resource for credible and current scientific information about desert tortoises through hosting annual symposia and training workshops. 2. To continue to engage, assist, collaborate with, and provide recommendations to agencies and other organizations to support the conservation and management of desert tortoises and their habitats.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. To grow, engage, educate, and energize a diverse membership and the public to support desert tortoise conservation efforts. 4. To facilitate projects that demonstrate the implementation of successful recovery techniques, conservation research, and other recovery programs through funding, collaboration, and other means of support. 5. To provide structure and opportunities for long-term funding of the Council's goals, strategies, and operational expenses through a robust fund-raising program. 6. To strengthen the organizational structure and efficiency of the Council and its Board of Directors.
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Background and Context

The Desert Tortoise Council (Council) and its Board of Directors (Board) have succeeded for 50 years in bringing information about the desert tortoise and threats to its conservation to scientists, managers, and the public through the Annual Business Meeting and Symposium. In addition, the Council has hosted workshops providing basic information on tortoise ecology, field techniques, threats and mitigation solutions, and regulatory protections for more than 35 years. However, populations of Mojave and Sonoran desert tortoises continue to decline, and increasingly more habitat is being lost to authorized development, wildfire, and unauthorized uses. Land and resource management agencies are unable to match conservation to the pace of habitat loss and degradation due to limited staff and budgets. Threats to desert tortoises continue to escalate. In 2015, the Board approved a 5-year strategic plan to focus activities of the Council and Board on critical tortoise conservation issues. Many aspects of that plan were successfully implemented, but more work is needed. The 2015-2020 Five-year Strategic Plan was updated as the 2020-2025 Five-year Strategic Plan, retaining the same strategic goals and establishing priority actions to be undertaken by the Board. The numbering of the goals does not necessarily reflect their order of importance and implementation. Though these previous efforts have elevated the role of the Council, each of the strategic goals remain only partially fulfilled. Now, with the 2025-2030 Five-year Strategic Plan, the Board will continue to pursue these same goals as the previous plans, and to respond to current challenges by prioritizing and expanding the Council's efforts to achieve conservation of desert tortoises.

Successes	Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 years of success. • The Council and Board are dedicated to conservation of desert tortoises. • Expert knowledge of desert tortoises, desert ecology, and application of regulations. • Successful history of hosting symposia provides a forum for outreach to members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An all-volunteer Board limits available time to address important issues. • Limited expertise in legal issues, fundraising, social media, and the administration of a nonprofit organization. • Limited communication between the Board and general membership outside of symposia.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful techniques workshops provide training for tortoise biologists and others. • The Ecosystems Advisory Committee provides review of and comments on proposed projects, regulations, and policies. • Operations Manager hired to provide full-time support to the Board. • Available funding to support small-scale projects. • Initial progress in developing advanced workshops, formalizing Board policies, and utilizing social media to increase the Council's profile and educate the public. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to involve general membership in Council functions and decisions by the Board. • No formal procedures for transfer of knowledge and function from long-term Board members to the next generation. • Coordination with management agencies and implementation of training workshops disrupted by Covid pandemic. • Funds are insufficient to support large-scale projects. • Slow implementation in fundraising. • Inability to augment the membership in a meaningful way, with only 400 members as of 2025.
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Council Goals for 2020-2025

Goal 1: To be a resource for credible and current scientific information about desert tortoises through hosting annual symposia, training workshops, and other methods.

As knowledge expands on the biology, ecology, conservation, and management of desert tortoises, it is important to distribute this information for use by all those interested in the continued survival of tortoises in the wild. However, despite many detailed studies, the compilation of results, and the development of specific conservation/management techniques, dissemination of this information can be more widespread, effective, and timely.

Strategies:

- a) Continue to host the annual symposium and increase the number of participants.
 - b) Develop and conduct a full suite of training workshops, utilizing in-person and virtual training formats, including but not limited to:
 - Introduction to desert tortoise ecology and management to be conducted annually.
 - Handling techniques to be offered at least every other year.
 - Health assessment training or refresher provided at least once over a five-year period.
 - Survey techniques for Sonoran desert tortoise conducted at least once every five years.
 - c) Develop opportunities for entry-level tortoise biologists to gain additional field experience.
 - d) Provide ready access (compliant with copyright laws) to scientific literature, agency reports, and regulatory/compliance documents relevant to the desert tortoise.
 - e) Explore opportunities where college credit may be available for workshop attendees.
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Goal 2: To engage, assist, collaborate with, and provide guidance to agencies and other organizations to support conservation and management of desert tortoises and their habitats

The ultimate responsibility for conservation of desert tortoises lies with land and resource management agencies. These agencies implement environmental compliance regulations and manage a vast acreage of desert tortoise habitat. However, the resources available to these agencies are often limited, and the decisions made may be confounded by conflicting demands and political agendas. The Council can assist these agencies in making “informed decisions” by working in conjunction with the agencies and providing accurate information on which to base management decisions. It is through the actions of the Council that the tortoise has a “voice,” which should be considered in agency decisions.

Strategies:

- a) Maintain an active Ecosystems Advisory Committee that reviews and comments on proposed developments, land management, and other actions potentially affecting desert tortoises.
 - b) Provide training to both the Board and general members on the most efficient ways to review project documents and the most effective ways to comment on projects.
 - c) Provide representation on agency committees, work groups, recovery teams, and other forums that provide decisions/recommendations affecting desert tortoises or their habitats.
 - d) Provide a briefing program to inform new agency staff of tortoise related issues.
 - e) Increase the Council’s visibility at meetings, hearings, and social media, both electronically and in print (e.g., newspaper interviews).
 - f) Engage legal counsel as needed.
 - g) Provide funding to leverage additional funds from agencies to achieve specified tasks.
 - h) Partner with other conservation groups to strengthen position statements.
 - i) Develop an international program for the Council to support conservation of tortoises in Mexico.
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Goal 3: To grow, engage, educate, and energize a diverse membership and the public to support desert tortoise conservation efforts

Strength comes from numbers. A large Council membership of people willing to engage political, management, and regulatory entities can demand accountability and bring about change. Effective communication by the Board with the Council membership is required to provide information about actions that can be taken for the benefit of desert tortoises, and to support Council activities. Educating the public at large will additionally provide strength in attaining political will for desert tortoise conservation.

Strategies:

- a) Expand our membership base by embracing all interests relevant to desert tortoises and conservation of desert ecosystems (e.g., husbandry, pets, zoological, conservation, research, academia, students, land acquisition and management, regulatory protection, and public interested in desert tortoises).
- b) Grow a robust student membership; provide funding to support student travel to annual symposia.
- c) Encourage participation of Mexican biologists in the annual symposium; provide support through reduced registration fees and travel costs.

- d) Increase visibility of the Council and its mission through the sale of merchandise and presence at meetings of professional organization relevant to tortoises or conservation, as appropriate.
- e) Work to attract more corporate memberships.
- f) Develop a Strategic Membership/Marketing/Communications Plan that includes, in part, communicating to lapsed members and coordination with other organizations whose membership may be interested in tortoise conservation issues and membership in the Council.
- g) Provide a process for the membership to support Council activities and functions, to be notified of important projects where assistance is required, and to serve on committees.
- h) Develop a consistent voice and messaging approach.
- i) Survey the membership to determine what type of membership benefits are important to them (e.g., special access to tortoise literature, interaction with other professionals, job postings, reduced rates for member attendance at symposia and workshops).
- j) Communicate success stories and acknowledge the people that are making a difference for tortoise conservation by presenting them with awards at symposia.
- k) Provide timely notice of information on current research and issues of conservation concern relevant to desert tortoises.
- l) Develop a robust public outreach program and be a “hub of communication,” keeping membership informed of current tortoise related issues.
 - Utilize up-to-date Membership Database.
 - Website.
 - Media (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, newsletter, blog).
 - Organize opportunities for members to interact.
- m) Encourage member input for media outputs.

Goal 4: To facilitate projects that demonstrate the implementation of successful restoration and enhancement techniques, land acquisition, research, and other conservation programs through funding, collaboration, and other means of support.

Coordinated implementation of actions that benefit desert tortoise conservation is critical for maintaining and recovering desert tortoise species. These actions may involve developing scientific information that is useful in supporting conservation actions, reducing threats, or conducting field surveys. The results of these actions will help ensure the use of the best management practices and the most current scientific information in making management decisions.

Despite millions of dollars spent on Mojave desert tortoise recovery efforts, this species continues to experience population declines throughout most of its range, and in some areas very severe declines. Though the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) recovery plan may provide a comprehensive assessment of threats to Mojave desert tortoise and identify actions needed to recover the species, implementation of these actions are often piece-meal or non-existent. Successful recovery may require implementing management actions for each tortoise population or focal area to simultaneously address the full suite of threats and management conflicts. The source(s) of the problem(s) must be identified; what needs to be done to address the problem(s) must be understood; and the proper techniques and knowledge of how to

implement the action must be available. But of course, this also requires funding, the land base, permits, the will to act, and a prolonged commitment to accomplish all tasks.

Strategies:

- a) Provide funds to projects that demonstrate successful conservation actions.
 - b) Expand the Grants Program, providing funds for meaningful proposals to address current tortoise research needs and management issues focusing on applied management and awarding at least one grant each year.
 - c) Work with the USFWS Desert Tortoise Recovery Office to identify and adopt at least one demonstration area where all actions are taken for the benefit of desert tortoises.
 - d) Focus on federal agency lands (e.g., particularly Bureau of Land Management and perhaps military and National Park Service) and assist agencies in implementing a full-spectrum of desert tortoise recovery actions at a landscape-level scale for the Mojave desert tortoise.
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Goal 5: To provide structure and opportunities for long-term funding of the Council through a robust fund-raising program.

It takes money to run an organization. It takes considerably more money to fund the implementation of desert tortoise conservation actions.

Strategies:

- a) Identify specific funding goals and provide funds for implementing specific projects or to attain specific goals.
 - b) Seek specific grant opportunities available to nonprofit organizations and to prepare grant applications.
 - c) Maintain the “rainy day fund”.
 - d) Continue to work with a professional fundraiser to develop a Strategic Fund-Raising Plan to reach specific funding targets.
 - e) Develop outreach campaigns and produce issue-driven promotional videos and other outreach efforts.
 - f) Work to attract corporate sponsors and other sources of potential donations.
 - g) Host and effectively manage symposia and workshops to achieve sustainable income to support Council activities.
 - h) Generate funding to continue to support a paid Operations Manager.
 - i) Explore the organizational structure of the Board and Council to facilitate solicitation of funds and management of grant programs.
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Goal 6: To strengthen the organizational structure and efficiency of the Council and its Board of Directors

The ability of the Council to facilitate the ultimate conservation of desert tortoises is dependent on the continued, long-term function of the Council and its Board. To ensure that the Council remains engaged over the extended period needed for recovery requires commitment by a succession of individuals willing to accept responsibility for continuing the Mission of the Council. People with diverse skills, knowledge,

background, and experience provide an array of perspectives for solving problems and joining together provides a strong voice to advocate for desert tortoise conservation. Clear operational policies implemented by the Board provide for efficient administration of the Council, consistent decision-making, and continuity generating and supporting effective conservation actions.

Strategies:

- a) Expand the diversity of Board membership with varied backgrounds, expertise, and experience (particularly expertise in social media and fund raising) to ensure the long-term continuity of the Council and its governing Board.
- b) Develop and define policies and procedures to improve operational efficiency and guide consistent decision-making.
- c) Improve management of finances, taxes, and obligations to retain non-profit status; consider contracts to appropriate skilled bookkeepers, certified public accountants, and other professional financial personnel.
- d) Mentor new Board members to assume increased responsibility in the operations of the Council and Board, and to facilitate transition of leadership.
- e) Improve communication among Board members by conducting frequent conference calls and web-based meetings, and holding in-person meetings, as needed; develop a web-based Board calendar and document exchange portal; use email correspondence as necessary to conduct important business between Board meetings.
- f) Reassess, as needed, the roles and responsibilities of officers, and the functions of standing and ad hoc committees; continue to develop position descriptions for all Board positions and committees; empower officers and committee chairpersons with decision making authority and predefined budget limits to facilitate timely decisions.
- g) In anticipation of turnover of Board personnel, and to affect a smooth transition of responsibilities, key officers and the chairperson of key standing committees shall identify, with the approval of the Board Chairperson, a person to function as an understudy to fill in for the officer or committee chairperson if the officer or committee chairperson can no longer function in that position.
- h) Expand the annual budgeting process to include pre-approved funds to be expended at the discretion of identified offices and committee chairpersons.
- i) Provide Board members with a handbook to familiarize them with Board member responsibilities, the procedures and policies of the Board and each committee, and how they can contribute.
- j) Provide training for Board members concerning the Board's fiduciary responsibilities, ethics/conflict of interest, and liability and risks.
- k) Provide instruction on how to be effective in communicating with agencies and political representatives.
- l) Develop guidelines for archiving Council documents and other materials to be maintained in a central, accessible location

Prioritization of Council and Board Actions

Though all stated goals and strategies are important for the conservation of desert tortoises, the Board has established 5 high priority objectives to focus Board-related time, energy, and funding. These objectives are

intended to address current challenges in tortoise conservation and to elevate the Council to the “next level of success.” Attaining these objectives requires combining strategies from various goals and establishing a vision for the continuation of the organization to fulfill the Council’s mission over the long term.

Priority Objectives (listed in no particular order):

- a) Improve management of finances.
- b) To collaborate with federal, state, and county agencies and other organizations to address tortoise conservation issues, provide a forum for discussions and sharing information, expand training and education opportunities for the public and agency personnel, and provide training of field biologists to support agency permitting requirements.
- c) Working with land and resource management agencies, identify one or more priority tortoise recovery areas to focus on the implementation of management actions to benefit the recovery of Mojave desert tortoise.
- d) To secure funding to advance the mission of the Council. Funds are needed to support organizational infrastructure, the continued employment of an Operations Manager, and most importantly to facilitate the completion of pragmatic tortoise conservation actions.
- e) To expand our efforts to educate the public about tortoises, threats, and needed conservation. This should result in an increase in our membership and an increase in the collective power of the voice of the Council.

Strategic Planning Process

The 2015-2020 Five-year Strategic Plan is the result of a two-day retreat attended by the presiding Board of Directors, facilitated *pro bono* by Solution Strategies International, Inc., and held in Wrightwood, California, June 7-8, 2014. The overarching goal of the retreat was to develop a unified vision for the future of the Council. Prior to the retreat, the facilitators conducted a confidential interview with each Board member. From these interviews, common themes and concerns were identified that formed the discussion topics for the retreat. In October 2019, Solution Strategies again facilitate a Board retreat to evaluate the status of implementation of the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan and to adjust goals and priorities, as needed. Numerous challenges and limitations were discussed. Priorities were established to strengthen the operations of the Board and to achieve the Mission of the Council. The discussions and consensus reached during the retreat are documented in the “Desert Tortoise Council – Retreat Summary Report, October 19-20, 2019”, prepared by Solution Strategies International, Inc., and resulted in the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan. In 2023, the Board Chairperson requested that the current strategic plan be reviewed for progress in meeting goals (see Board Meeting minutes, July 9, 2023), and the results of this review carried forward into revisions of the 2025-2030 Five-year Strategic Plan.