

# Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Newsletter

Fall 1990

11 : 3



## Raven Rantings

By William I. Boarman

Common ravens are adaptable and intelligent animals.

In addition to being scavengers, they are also accomplished predators. The proliferation of landfills, sewage ponds, agricultural fields,

urbanization, and other human activities provide them with year-round supplies of food and water. The steady supply of food and water increases the carrying capacity of the desert ecosystem for ravens thus allowing more ravens to survive during periods of low natural food and water availability, and facilitates the successful rearing of more young. Ravens are extraordinary opportunists. A large raven population in the California desert means more birds to seek out and prey on any food source, including tortoises.

See page 2



**Ravens: Continued from page 1**

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Desert tortoise biologists have identified several sources of mortality among wild tortoise populations including disease, habitat destruction, vandalism, and raven predation. The contention that raven predation is an important factor in tortoise mortality is supported by several points: (1) Ravens are physically capable of capturing slow-moving animals such as tortoises; (2) Large numbers of juvenile shells that show signs of being eaten by ravens have been found in piles beneath known raven nests, perches, and roosts and scattered individually throughout the desert; and (3) Examinations of age/size class distributions of live tortoises on Bureau of Land Management permanent study plots show significant decreases in the numbers of juvenile tortoises present in the populations.

The BLM has initiated efforts to control all sources of tortoise mortality. One such effort is the Raven Management Plan, a comprehensive program designed to reduce the effects of raven predation on tortoise populations. The Plan proposes to reduce the availability of artificial food and water sources through efficient management of landfills and sewage ponds; to study the effects of artificial perch and nest site reduction in tortoise habitat; to discourage attempts to nest in tortoise habitats by nest destruction and egg addling; to dissuade ravens from eating tortoises by conditioned taste aversion; and to control numbers of ravens by poisoning and shooting.

In April, both the Draft Raven Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) were issued for public comment. The closing date for comments was August 1st. We received only 77 comments, a relatively low number for a supposedly controversial program. Of those comments, 22% expressed unqualified opposition, 38% unqualified support, and 39% qualified support.

The Bureau has formed a Technical Review Team to advise it on how to respond to the comments, incorporate them into the Final EIS, and proceed with the Raven Management Plan. The members of the Technical Review Team are Tom Dodson, Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Jim

St. Amant, Desert Tortoise Council, Dr. Faith Campbell, Natural Resources Defense Council, John Borneman, National Audubon Society, Steve Johnson, Defenders, Dr. John Grandy, Humane Society of the United States, Dan Pearson, Southern California Edison, Lenny Young, State of Washington Department of Natural Resources, Dr. David Otis, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

The team will hold its first meeting on November 1, 1990.

Mr. William I. Boarman is a Raven Specialist based at the California Desert District of the Bureau of Land Management.

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## **Tortoise Tracks**

Tortoise Tracks is the quarterly newsletter of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection and preservation of the desert tortoise.

### **Officers**

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All correspondence should be sent to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc., P.O. Box 453, Ridgecrest, CA 93556.

All manuscripts, photos, and materials for publication in the Tortoise Tracks newsletter should be sent to Mr. Jun Lee, Managing Director, KRJ Media, 3407 West Sixth Street, Suite 105, Los Angeles, CA 90020.



## ANNUAL MEETING AND BANQUET

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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. will host the Annual Meeting of the corporation and Banquet on Saturday, January 26, 1991 at Hodel's Buffet in Bakersfield, California. The meeting of the corporation is open to all members and the public. The price of dinner is \$9.00 per person, which includes tax, tip and beverage.

Please consider joining us. We look forward to seeing the members we've met in previous years, and we encourage others to attend as well...Let's become acquainted! The afternoon meeting offers an opportunity to hear firsthand of the Committee's activities during the past year and of its goals for the future. If you cannot be present in the afternoon, we hope you will be able to join us for the evening dinner and program. The schedule of events is as follows:

Business Meeting	2:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.
Social Hour	5:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.
Dinner and Program	6:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.

Your reservation must be received by January 18, 1991. For your convenience a reservation form has been included in the inset of this newsletter. If the need arises to contact the Committee for further information, you may call Roger Dale at (213) 287-1874.

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### DR. MICHAEL WEINSTEIN TO GIVE ANNUAL DINNER PRESENTATION

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Dr. Michael Weinstein, leader for American Honda's research program on desert tortoise relocation will be the dinner speaker at the January 26 Annual Meeting and Banquet.

In a program titled "Honda's Desert Tortoise Relocation Project," Dr. Weinstein will summarize the results of the 1989 field season (the first year of effort) involving relocation of about 80

wild tortoises from the Honda Project to adjacent habitat at the northwestern corner of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, and enhancing part of the relocation site with artificial precipitation. Many of the relocated and resident tortoises were fitted with radio transmitters and are being tracked by a team of field workers, including Michael Cornish of UCLA. The field team is collecting data on tortoise behavior and movements, as well as their health status.

Dr. Weinstein, who graduated with a B.S. in Physics from the University of Oregon, and an M.S. in Biology from California Polytechnic University at San Luis Obispo, received his Ph.D. through the Department of Environmental Science and Engineering at UCLA in 1989. His dissertation was on models of desert tortoise habitat in California, using data from strip transects gathered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). He has contributed his analytical and statistical skills in several projects with Dr. Kristin Berry, including a morphometric analysis of shell shapes in tortoise populations occurring in the United States, a comparison of growth rates in male and female tortoises in different parts of California, and validation of the habitat model for California tortoises. In addition, he spent a field season at the Goffs study plot in 1986, as part of a project between Southern California Edison, UCLA, and the BLM with Dr. Fred Turner and Dr. Berry. Dr. Weinstein is now a full-time employee of Science Applications International, Inc., and the Honda project is one of his responsibilities.

### "Don't Turn Me Loose"

The release of captive tortoises critically affects the welfare and long term recovery of wild desert tortoise populations. Released captives threaten wild populations by introducing and spreading disease, mixing genetic stocks, and disrupting wild tortoise social systems.

In an effort to reduce this threat, the Committee has retained Ironwood Productions to prepare a 15-minute educational video titled "Don't Turn Me Loose."



## Chuckwalla Bench Update

By Doran Sanchez

The small tortoise hatchling struggles out of his burrow to take his first look at the world around him: the Chuckwalla Bench. Although he faces a myriad of problems that may make his survival a struggle, he's one of the lucky ones. His home is in an area where the federal government and a variety of private organizations are working together to provide increased protection for wildlife and plant habitat.

Located in southeastern Riverside County, the Chuckwalla Bench Acquisition Area is south of Desert Center and north of the Chocolate Mountain Gunnery Range. In 1988 the Bureau of Land Management took the initiative to place additional valuable wildlife habitat at Chuckwalla Bench under Bureau protection. Similar to the land acquisition program at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area near California City, the consolidation of land at these areas will assist in the eventual recovery of the threatened desert tortoise.

The Chuckwalla Bench boundary encompasses approximately 395,000 acres. The area features 158 plant species, several of which have been classified as sensitive. The foothills provide excellent habitat for bighorn sheep, burro deer, and a rich variety of migratory and resident birds. Chuckwalla Bench also contains one of the three highest density tortoise populations in the California desert.

More than 60,000 acres of additional private land within Chuckwalla Bench have been identified by BLM as necessary for the preservation of this valuable habitat and are targeted for acquisition. Through land purchases and exchanges, BLM has been able to purchase and consolidate more than 15,500 acres in the past few years.

Land acquisition at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area began in 1987 and at Chuckwalla Bench in 1988. Money for the purchases was appropriated by Congress from the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is supported by royalties from offshore oil production, motor

boat fuel taxes, and sales of surplus federal property. Since 1988, Congress has appropriated \$1.8 million for land purchases at Chuckwalla Bench.

Much of the funding resulted from the combined efforts of many groups such as the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Defenders of Wildlife, and The Nature Conservancy, all of which actively lobbied Congress. This cooperative effort continues to help the Bureau achieve its goal to consolidate public lands in these areas for the protection and preservation of valuable wildlife and plant habitat. The Nature Conservancy, in particular, has assisted in many of the acquisitions, negotiating with land owners at Chuckwalla Bench.

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**"Although it is a slow process, each successful exchange or purchase adds momentum and increases the potential for more property to be acquired," Ojala said.**

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Candace Ojala, a Realty Specialist in BLM's Palm Springs Resource Area, joined the California Desert District staff in June 1988 to oversee land acquisition at Chuckwalla Bench. She works directly with private land owners, which she admits can be difficult because there are so many. "That is where The Nature Conservancy has proved to be a valuable ally," Ojala said. "They have a large staff that can make more contacts. We focus on a certain area and contact land owners to see if they are interested in selling. By working together, we are able to double our efforts."

While the overall purpose of the program is to consolidate land for the protection and preservation of habitat, she admits it will be hard to do. Although BLM does have condemnation authority, the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act does not allow for acquisition through condemnation. "All we can offer is the appraised value of the land. Owners don't have to sell, and many times we can't meet their price," Ojala said.

The Bureau can either buy land outright or arrange land exchanges. "A direct sale is much easier and can usually be processed in six to nine



## RESERVATION FOR ANNUAL BANQUET

Please make checks payable to the DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE, INC., and send to:

Mr. Roger Dale  
Recording Secretary, DTPC  
3736 Jasmine Avenue, #208  
Los Angeles, CA 90034

Questions? Please call Mr. Roger Dale at (213) 287-1874

### Checks must be received by January 18, 1991

Please make a reservation for \_\_\_\_\_ person(s) in my name, for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Annual Banquet at Hodel's Buffet, Bakersfield, California, Saturday, January 26, 1991. I understand that the dinner will be \$9.00 per person, including tax, tip and beverage.

I am enclosing a check for \$\_\_\_\_\_.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Organization (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

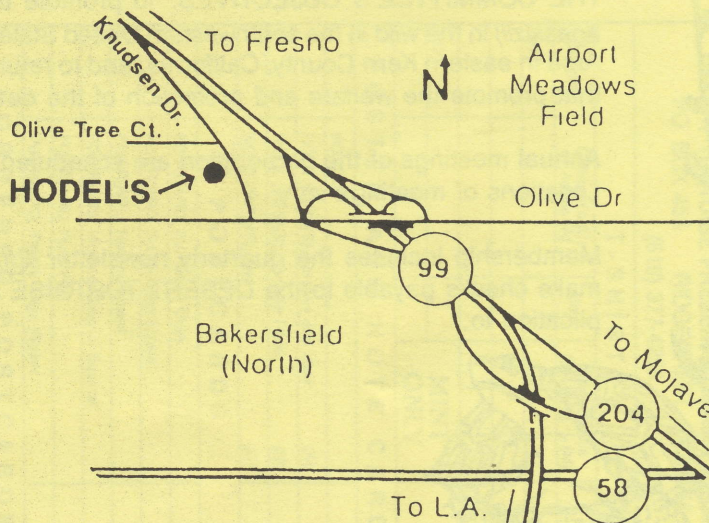
Plan to attend afternoon business meeting: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

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For your information and convenience, a vicinity map for the Annual Meeting and Banquet is provided below, along with information for three motels, all within a block of Hodel's.

Economy Inns of America  
Bakersfield #2 (North)  
6100 Knudsen Drive  
(Senior Citizen Discount)  
Reservations: (800) 826-0778

E-Z 8 Motel  
Bakersfield #2  
5200 Olive Tree Court  
Reservations: (805) 392-1511

Motel 6  
Bakersfield (North)  
5241 Olive Tree Court  
Reservations: (805) 392-9700





# DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE, INC.

P.O. BOX 453

RIDGECREST, CALIF. 93556

## APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP/RENEWAL

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please Print)

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Phone (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_  
(Street or P.O. Box)

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ New ( ) Renewal ( )

I (we) hereby apply for the following membership:

GENERAL:      ( ) Individual Membership      \$ 15.00 annually  
                  ( ) Family Membership      \$ 20.00 annually  
                  ( ) Sponsor Membership      \$ 30.00 annually  
                  ( ) Benefactor Membership      \$ 75.00 annually  
                  ( ) Patron Membership      \$100.00 annually  
                  ( ) Life Membership      \$500.00

ORGANIZATION:      ( ) Organizations may join by paying the annual dues of any one of the above categories of General Membership.

ACTIVE:      ( ) Available to people who are willing to perform services essential to furtherance of Committee objectives, such as holding a chairmanship or a Board of Trustees position. Application for Active Membership must be made in writing and requires approval by the Board of Trustees.

## ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTION OR CONTRIBUTION ONLY

CONTRIBUTION:      ( ) Enclosed is a contribution of \$ \_\_\_\_\_.

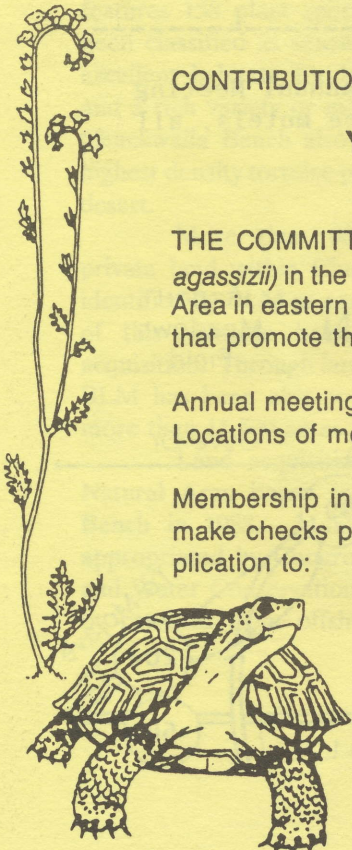
**Your contributions to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee  
are tax-deductible to the extent allowable by law.**

THE COMMITTEE'S OBJECTIVES: To promote the welfare of the desert tortoise (*Xerobates [Gopherus] agassizii*) in the wild in the southwestern United States and to assist with establishing the Desert Tortoise Natural Area in eastern Kern County, California; and to return the land to its natural state. Also, to engage in activities that promote the welfare and protection of the desert tortoise.

Annual meetings of the corporation are scheduled in January. Other meetings occur at six-week intervals. Locations of meetings vary.

Membership includes the quarterly newsletter Tortoise Tracks. Dues are payable on January 1st. Please make checks payable to the DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE, INC., and send with this application to:

Secretary  
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.  
P.O. Box 453  
Ridgecrest, CA 93556









## DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE, INC.

ON NOVEMBER 29, 1974 the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. was formed in order to:

- (a) promote the welfare of the California State Reptile, the Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizi*) in its native wild state in the southwestern United States;
- (b) establish Preserves for the Desert Tortoise in prime habitat areas;
- (c) and to foster and publicize the uses for such areas for selected forms of recreation, education, conservation and research.

SPECIAL THANKS to the contributors and supporters of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

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### Tortoise Tracks

Tortoise Tracks, the newsletter of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc., is produced by volunteers. Many thanks to the article contributors to this Fall 1990 issue.

SPECIAL THANKS and best regards to Mrs. Jean Jones, former editor of Tortoise Tracks. Due to Mrs. Jones' commitment, the Committee has available a comprehensive written history.

Jun Lee.....Editor

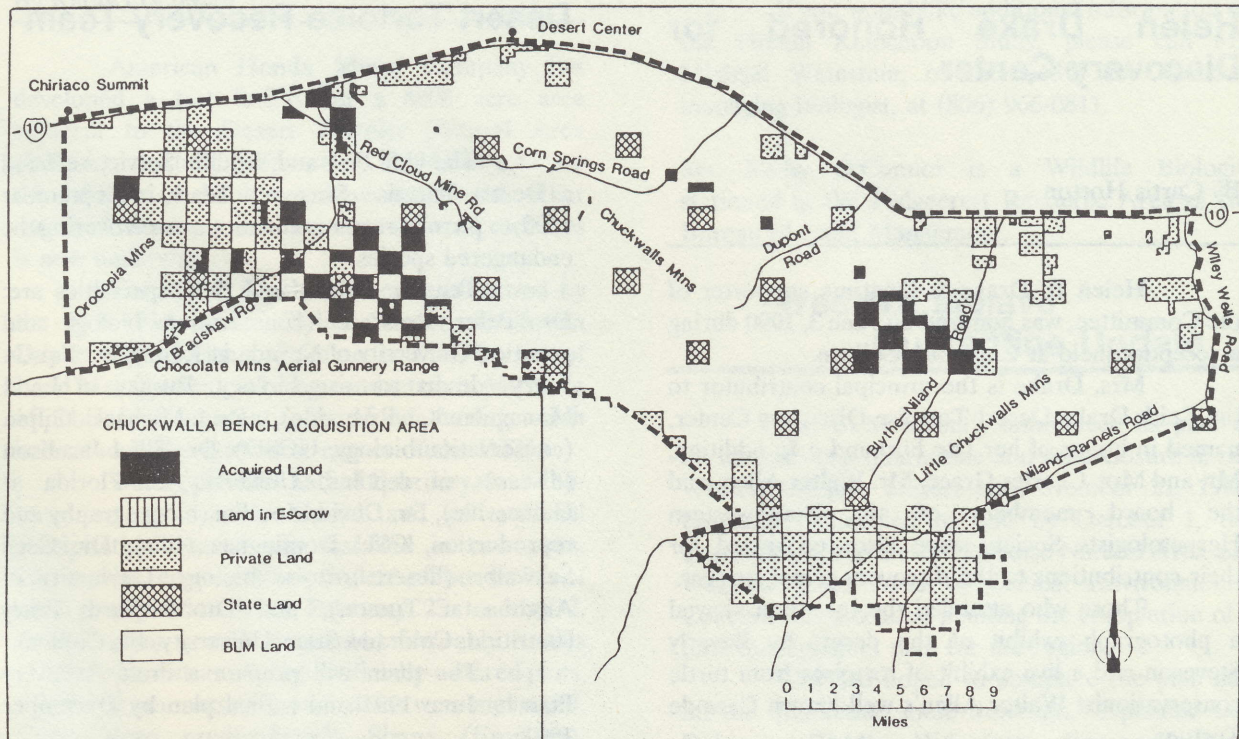
Roger Dale.....Assistant Editor

Carol Panlaqui.....Production

Bev Steveson.....Photographer

ARTICLES AND MATERIAL FOR THE WINTER 1991 issue of Tortoise Tracks should be sent to Mr. Jun Lee, Managing Director, KRJ Media, 3407 West Sixth Street, Suite 105, Los Angeles, CA 90020. **Submission deadline is December 20, 1990.**





months. A land exchange is considerably more complicated and time consuming," Ojala commented. Before BLM land can be traded, an environmental assessment, mineral reports, cultural and archaeological surveys, and wildlife evaluations must be completed. If studies indicate valuable resources are present, the land usually will not leave federal ownership. Land exchanges are labor intensive, and one transaction can take more than two years to complete.

"Obviously we prefer an outright purchase because it is quicker and more economical," Ojala said. "But BLM will do whatever we can to achieve our goal to protect the wildlife habitat. Although it is a slow process, each successful exchange or purchase adds momentum and increases the potential for more property to be acquired. The

Bureau intends to consolidate as much of the critical habitat at Chuckwalla Bench as possible, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise."

Meanwhile, BLM Rangers have increased patrol of the area to limit traffic and enforce closures and other regulations designed to protect the fragile resources. BLM has also developed wildlife watering sources, provided informational signing, and posted new signs at major entrances to Chuckwalla Bench to help inform visitors of the special resources and regulations.

"BLM's land acquisition has and will continue to be a success due to the cumulative efforts of many people dedicated to the preservation of the California desert's wildlife and fragile ecosystems," Ojala concluded. "It is a modern day example of a cooperative effort to preserve the present for the future."



## Helen Drake Honored for Discovery Center

By Curtis Horton

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Helen B. Drake, a longtime supporter of the Committee, was honored on June 3, 1990 during a reception held at Chapman College.

Mrs. Drake is the principal contributor to the Keith Drake Desert Tortoise Discovery Center, named in honor of her late husband. In addition, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Grace, Mr. Walter Allen, and the board members of the Southwestern Herpetologists Society were also recognized for their contributions to the discovery center project.

Those who attended the reception viewed a photograph exhibit of the desert by Beverly Steveson and a live exhibit of tortoises from turtle conservationist Walter Allen's well known Casa de Tortuga.

The Desert Tortoise Discovery Center is now one of the main vehicles for the Committee's public education programs. The mobile center visits schools and events in order to promote the recovery of the desert tortoise and its ecosystem.

This spring the Discovery Center also served as the on-site residence of the DTNA Naturalist Shannon Ginn. Ms. Ginn attended the reception to share her experiences with the guests.

The June reception hosted by Chapman College faculty member Dr. Fred Caporaso has successfully re-emphasized the role of the Discovery Center in the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's goal of educating the public about the endangered condition of the desert tortoise.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Drake was unable to attend the gathering due to sudden illness. Guests joined in signing a card of appreciation and well wishes, and the Committee later presented her with a commemorative gift.

**Please renew annual memberships by January 1, 1991. Renewal form enclosed.**

## Desert Tortoise Recovery Team

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service selected a Desert Tortoise Recovery Team in September 1990, to provide recommendations on recovering the endangered species.

Team members and their specialties are: Dr. Peter Brussard (conservation biology and genetics, University of Nevada at Reno), Dr. Kristin Berry (desert tortoise biology, Bureau of Land Management, Riverside), Dr. Michael Gilpin (conservation biology, UCSD), Dr. Elliot Jacobson (diseases of reptiles, University of Florida at Gainesville), Dr. David Morafka (biogeography and reproduction, CSU Dominguez Hills), Dr. Cecil Schwalbe (desert tortoise biology, University of Arizona at Tucson), and Dr. Richard Tracy (nutrition, Colorado State University, Ft. Collins).

The team will prepare a draft Recovery Plan by June 1991 and a final plan by December 1991.

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## Turtle and Tortoise Symposium

By Jayne Chavez-Scales

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In August the California Turtle and Tortoise Club and Chapman College jointly sponsored the Symposium on Turtles and Tortoises: Conservation and Captive Husbandry. Over 350 people, representing 14 states, attended the four-day event. The conference included over 20 presentations by turtle and tortoise authorities from across the United States.

Of special significance was the formation of NATTA -- the North American Turtle and Tortoise Alliance. This group will promote the welfare of turtles and tortoises through education, conservation, and political action. The group hopes to present a united front to influence not only legislation, but various practices in the pet trade and other areas of commercial exploitation.



## HONDA RELOCATION PROJECT

By Kathy O'Connor

American Honda Motor Company has developed a test facility on a 4000 acre area adjacent to the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA). A study proposed by Honda to evaluate the effects of habitat enhancement and other specified measures on relocation of desert tortoises is now underway.

The study, which has been authorized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Game, and the Bureau of Land Management, is being conducted on 640 acres of public land, adjacent to the Honda facility, which is located in the northwest corner of the DTNA.

During the first half of February, four 160-acre test plots were fenced and an artificial precipitation system was installed in two plots. These plots received the equivalent of four inches of total precipitation from February 23 to May 2. Annual plant growth responded favorably to this additional moisture. In the artificially-watered plots, significant amounts of annual plants were measured. These were predominantly filaree (*Erodium*), fiddleneck (*Amsincka*), Mediterranean grass (*Schismus*), *Langloisia*, and mustard (family *Cruciferae*). In the non-watered plots only trace amounts of these plants were found.

Honda received its permit in late April from the USFWS to relocate the desert tortoises from private land onto the test plots. During the months of May and July they completed three intensive surveys, and found 71 tortoises. All but two (which were small juveniles) were fitted with radio transmitters, and all 71 were relocated to the test plots. Each of these animals was checked 24 and 48 hours after relocation and at least once each month after that to monitor its condition and health.

Thirty-five desert tortoises of the resident population were also fitted with radio transmitters. The condition of these animals is also being checked monthly in order to monitor the effects of the artificial watering and the relocated tortoises on the resident population.

Innovative design has yielded transmitters about the size of a double-"A" cell battery for

adults, and solar-powered units no larger than a fingertip for the juveniles. So far these have worked in the field as well as the older, heavier designs.

If you would like additional information on the Honda Relocation Study, please call Mr. Michael Weinstein, of the SAIC and Honda's managing biologist, at (806) 966-0811.

Ms. Kathy O'Connor is a Wildlife Biologist stationed at the Ridgecrest Resource Area of the Bureau of Land Management.

## Western Mojave Quarantine Update

The BLM recently announced its plan to lift its year-long quarantine and road closure in the Western Mojave Desert on November 21, 1990. Originally scheduled to end by October 1, the quarantine of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and Western Rand Area of Critical Environmental Concern was extended pending the completion of a final management plan for the region.

"We had hoped to complete the plan and lift the quarantine some time ago," explained Lee Delaney, BLM's Ridgecrest Resource Area Manager. Because the area includes the habitat of the desert tortoise, a federally listed threatened species, the management plan is being reviewed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That agency must issue its ruling on whether the actions included in the plan might negatively impact the tortoise or its habitat before BLM can approve the management plan.

"Several people have asked about the effectiveness of the quarantine in helping the tortoise," Delaney continued. "Although we cannot quantify its effects in a scientific sense, we are confident the quarantine has reduced human-caused stress on these animals. The continuation of the drought may have offset some of these benefits, but we feel we made the right decision last year."

The Rand Mountains/Fremont Valley area provides important habitat for the desert tortoise, and BLM's goal is to maintain a long-term viable and healthy population in the region. Over the last several years, vandalism, raven predation, and varying from 20 to 70 percent.



## **Desert Tortoise Council Schedules 1991 Symposium**

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Place March 8-11, 1991 on your calendars! The Desert Tortoise Council has scheduled its Sixteenth Annual Meeting and Symposium for Friday through Monday, March 8-11, 1991 at the Palace Station, located in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The meeting will feature about two and a half days of papers, panel discussions, films, and exhibits. Tentative plans include a panel on the topic of captive breeding programs for endangered tortoises and a showing of "The Turtle Planet," the new film directed and produced by Dr. Peter Prichard and Walter Allen.

On March 11, a tour is planned at the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center, a 160-acre facility in the southern part of the Las Vegas Valley.

The Center was funded through a legal arrangement among several Las Vegas developers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Nevada Department of Wildlife, and the State of Nevada. Hundreds of wild tortoises, collected from privately-owned parcels within the City of Las Vegas, are housed in specially designed pens and are part of several research projects.

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The upcoming Winter edition of Tortoise Tracks will include more information on this event.

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**Please Renew All Annual Memberships By January 1, 1991.**

**DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE, INC.**  
P.O. Box 453, Ridgecrest, CA 93556

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