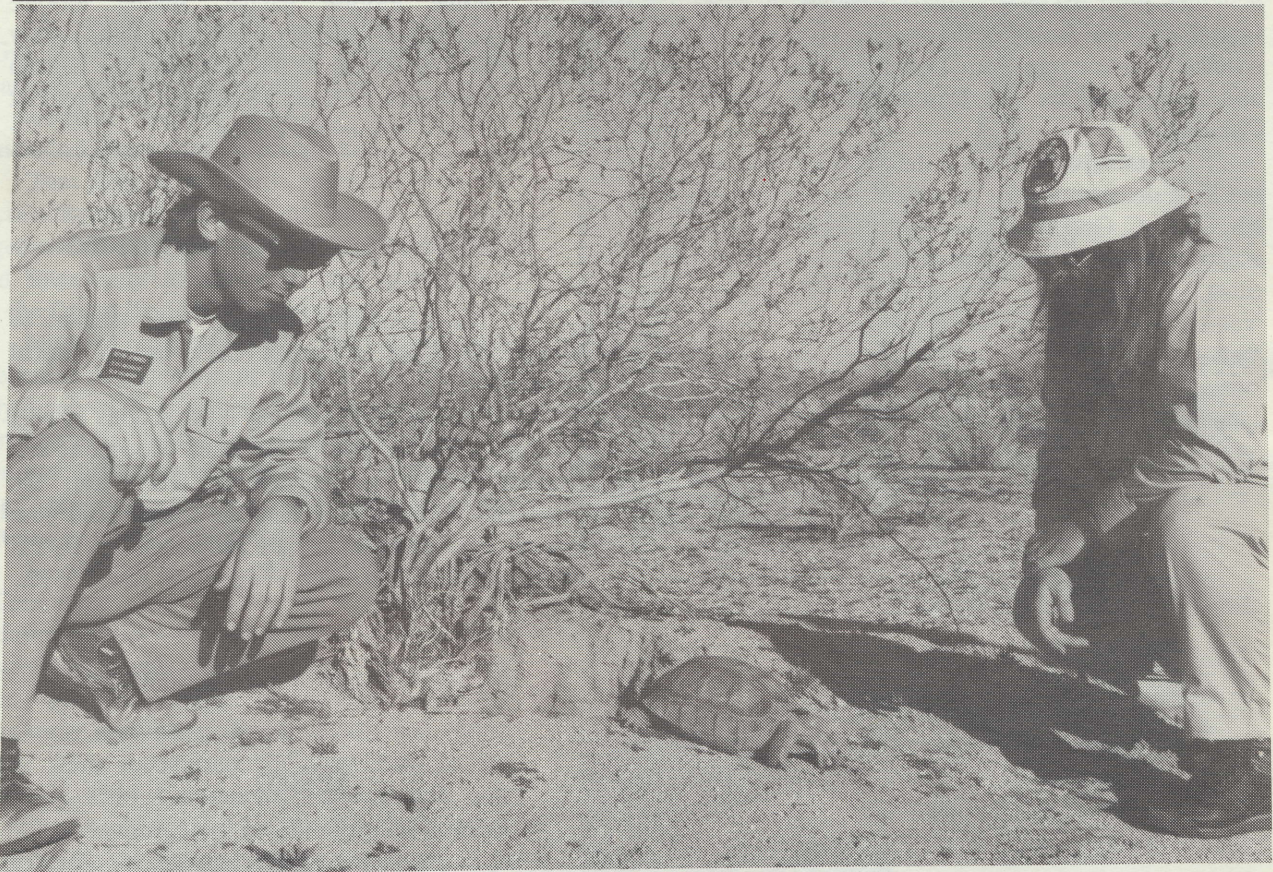


Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Newsletter

Spring 1991
12:1



Naturalists Bryan Jennings and Jackie Gooch greet tortoise emerging from burrow at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. Photo by Bev Steveson.

Recreational Vehicle Use Endangers Prime Habitat Next to the Desert Tortoise Natural Area

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. is seeking legal remedies to compel the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to control vehicle use in prime tortoise habitat in the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley located in Kern County, California.

The Committee is currently evaluating several measures to stop the habitat destruction caused by uncontrolled vehicle activities near the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. The Board of Trustees of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is in intensive

consultations with the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club and other organizations with long-standing interest in preserving the tortoise habitat.

At its April 23, 1991 news conference the Committee will release substantial evidence that the BLM's premature lifting of a quarantine protecting the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley has resulted in significant habitat damage.

"In November 1990, the BLM lifted its September 1989 quarantine in the Rand-Fremont plan area and opened specific routes of travel for use by off-road vehicles. The key issue is that the routes were opened without adopting the Rand-Fremont Management Plan and without providing a support framework for managing the off-road vehicle activities under the new circumstances created by the federal and state listing of the tortoise as a threatened species," summarizes Tom Dodson, Vice President and spokesman for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee.

Extensive damage in the Rand-Fremont area has been documented by Mr. Gilbert O. Goodlett and Mr. Glenn C. Goodlett of EnviroPlus Consulting in an independent study commissioned by the Committee titled, "Evidence of Unauthorized Off-Highway Vehicle Activity in the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley, Kern County, California." Based on field surveys conducted December 13 to 15, 1990 and on January 20, 1991, EnviroPlus Consulting concluded:

A total of 287 unauthorized (unmarked or closed) trails with at least five tracks per trail were observed to cross 46.2 miles of surveyed open routes. Of these 93% of trails were unmarked, and the remaining 7% were marked closed.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) policies limiting vehicle use to signed, open routes are ineffective. Intensive, negative impacts to desert tortoise habitat are occurring as a result.

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, therefore, demands satisfaction of the following four points:

1. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management limits or restricts recreational vehicle use until the severely damaged tortoise population recover at an acceptable level.
2. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management complies with the Endangered Species Act and fulfills the required Section 7 consultations with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in regards to drafting the Rand-Fremont Management Plan.
3. Both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management make public the discussions and considerations that relate to the Rand/Fremont Management Plan.
4. The Bureau complies with its own policies by identifying the Rand-Fremont area as prime tortoise habitat, stating tortoise population recovery goals, and significantly limiting access to the area until the Bureau completes its Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley Management Plan.

Member Support Urgently Needed

The Committee requests your support to compel the BLM to control OHV use in critical tortoise habitat.

In view of impending legal actions against the Bureau's reopening of the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley to recreational OHV use, the Committee requests your support. Please send your special and urgently needed donations to **DTPC Treasurer, P.O. Box 453, Ridgecrest, CA 93555.**

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee

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Guy, Spotts Honored at Annual Banquet

On January 26th the Committee honored Tom Guy and Richard Spotts at the Annual Meeting and Banquet held in Bakersfield. Guy and Spotts were presented Golden Tortoise Awards, the Committee's highest form of recognition.

Tom Guy is a Realty Specialist with the Ridgecrest Resource Area of the Bureau of Land Management. During the past several years he has worked intensively to complete land acquisitions within the Desert Tortoise Natural Area.

Richard Spotts is the California representative of Defenders of Wildlife. He has been actively involved in a number of tortoise conservation measures including lobbying to obtain Federal funding for tortoise habitat acquisitions and conservation funding. He served a key role in the campaign to list the tortoise as a Federally threatened species.

In addition to the Golden Tortoise Awards, the Committee also presented certificates of appreciation to Clay Panlaqui, Marie Storts, Anne Patterson, and Peggy Mills. Clay Panlaqui was honored for his much appreciated computer programming assistance; Maria Storts and Anne Patterson were recognized for their role in the Committee's IBM Community Fund award; and Peggy Mills was recognized for her efforts in printing and distributing the Tortoise Tracks newsletter.

Dr. Michael Weinstein, leader for American Honda's research program on desert tortoise relocation, completed the successful evening with an informative talk on the Honda Desert Tortoise Relocation Project.

The Committee again thanks its Golden Tortoise and Certificate honorees for their important contributions.

Right column from top to bottom Tom Guy of the BLM and Richard Spotts of Defenders of Wildlife are presented with Golden Tortoise Awards by Committee President Jayne Chavez-Scales. Photos by Bev Steveson.



Bureau to Amend Recreation Element of Desert Plan

In February the Bureau of Land Management commenced a year-long process of amending the recreation element of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan. The Plan amendment will establish guidelines for the management of future point-to-point races and other off-highway vehicle (OHV) events on the public land of the California desert.

Last year the Bureau declined to authorize the well known Barstow to Las Vegas motorcycle race and suspended racing on several other point-to-point courses. The Bureau took these actions in light of increasing awareness of the environmental impacts associated with these events. With the emergence of various new resource issues, it has become widely recognized that the acceptability of OHV racing needs to be re-evaluated. Among these issues is the 1990 Federal listing of the desert tortoise as a threatened species.

The CDCA Plan Amendment process allows for several forms of public input and review. The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is actively participating in this process. During February and March, BLM held a series of public workshops throughout southern California. These were essentially brainstorming sessions where interested individuals and groups had an opportunity to identify issues which should be considered in developing the Plan Amendment. Committee representatives attended a number of these workshops and expressed that any OHV use which may be authorized must be subject to the highest possible degree of accountability. The Committee supports extremely stringent criteria for the designation of OHV use areas, with no potential for damaging resources. Other major points raised by Committee members at the BLM workshops included the following:

- No OHV use should occur in Category 1 or 2 desert tortoise habitat (as defined in the 1988 Rangewide Plan for management of the tortoise on public lands);
- Racing in Category 3 tortoise habitat should be permitted only after detailed study of potential impacts and only with appropriate mitigation measures; and

- No OHV events should be authorized which the Bureau or other responsible agency cannot adequately enforce to ensure compliance with designated guidelines.

Based on the issues raised at the public workshops and the input of a five-member technical review team (composed of representatives of interested organization), the Bureau will propose a Draft Plan Amendment and a Draft Environmental Impact Statement. These documents will be ready for public distribution sometime this summer.

Later this year, the Bureau will hold another series of public meetings to review the draft Amendment and EIS. The Committee hopes that a large number of our members will be able to attend these meetings and express an interest in this very important issue. Future editions of *Tortoise Tracks* will provide updates on the Plan Amendment process and announce the dates and locations of future public workshops.

Longtime Committee Supporter Honored

The Desert Tortoise Committee is sad to report that longtime supporter Mrs. Constance Babcock passed away in August 1990 at the age of 81. For 29 years Mrs. Babcock owned Babcocks's Bookstore, a community landmark in Bakersfield which featured the writings of Kern County authors. She supported the Committee's early fundraising efforts by displaying DTPC materials and collecting donations for the Committee.

In memory of Mrs. Babcock, Committee Board members Bev Steveson and Laura Stockton have donated materials for a new Tour Guide Manual to enhance the Committee's tours of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. The manual provides information on the history of the Natural Area as well as reference material on desert wildlife, plants, and geology.

The Committee wishes to thank Bev and Laura for their generous gift honoring Mrs. Babcock and extends condolences to Mrs. Babcock's family.

EVIDENCE OF UNAUTHORIZED OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE ACTIVITY IN THE RAND MOUNTAINS AND FREMONT VALLEY, KERN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The following is an excerpt of a study commissioned by the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. and prepared by Gilbert O. Goodlett and Glenn C. Goodlett of EnviroPlus Consulting

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

At the request of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, EnviroPlus Consulting undertook a project to analyze unauthorized off-highway vehicle (OHV) activity in the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley of eastern Kern County, California. The area is adjacent to the northeastern part of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) and Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), contains the western Rand Mountain Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), and has significant habitat for the desert tortoise (U.S. Bureau of Land Management 1980; Sievers et al. 1988).

Specific objectives of the study included the following:

1. Investigate the degree of OHV impact on desert tortoise habitat in the study area with specific emphasis on those impacts that have occurred since the area was reopened to public use on November 21, 1990.
2. Determine the degree to which public use of the land, most of which is OHV activity, conforms with the publicly announced BLM policies.
3. If significant vehicle activity is occurring and if the vehicle use does not conform to BLM policies, identify the area of use.
4. Determine if relationships exist between open routes and unauthorized activity.

BACKGROUND

The desert tortoise (*Gopherus [Xerobates] agassizii*) was listed by the State of California in June 1989 as a threatened species. A few months later, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the species as endangered under an emergency rule, then followed with a permanent listing as threatened on April 4, 1990. The tortoise was listed because of rapidly declining populations,

habitat loss and fragmentation. The sources for population losses include vandalism, vehicle kills, collections, disease, and excessive raven predation. For habitat damage and loss, the causes are multifold.

Declines in tortoise populations are well-documented for the western Mojave desert (Berry 1990). Vandalism, damage to habitat from sheep grazing and off-high vehicles (OHV), upper respiratory tract disease (URDT), and ravens are particularly critical issues in the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley.

In 1989 the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) placed a significant portion of public land in the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley under a temporary emergency quarantine and road closure to provide increased protection for the desert tortoise and its habitat (U.S. Bureau of Land Management 1989). The area under quarantine included the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTNA) and Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and West Rand Mountains ACEC. All human activities, except those administratively authorized, were excluded from the DTNA and West Rand Mountains ACEC.

The protective action was lifted on November 21, 1990 (U.S. Bureau of Land Management 1990). According to a BLM media release, "Approximately 150 miles of roads will be opened in the area to provide access. Open routes will be signed with a brown post indicating their open status. Unmarked routes and trails and those marked with a red 'closed' post may not be used by motorized vehicles." This is a "...75 percent reduction in the existing routes." Further, "...camping will be allowed within 100 feet of a road in previously disturbed areas only."

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Field surveys were conducted December 13-15, 1990 and January 20, 1991. Methods used to evaluate OHV impacts included: driving 46.2 miles of open routes and recording the unauthorized tracks and trails which crossed the open routes; walking 37 transects, each of which was 500-feet long, perpendicular to open routes and recording OHV impacts; raking closed routes and rechecking them 34 days later for unauthorized vehicle use; and incidental observations.

A total of 287 unauthorized (unmarked or closed) trails with at least five tracks per trail were observed to cross 46.2 miles of surveyed open routes. Of these, 93% of trails were unmarked, and the remaining 7% were marked closed. The signed, closed routes represent a small fraction of the total number of trails being used by OHV enthusiasts.

On each of the 37 transects, a mean of 27 unauthorized tracks were found, an average of one track every 20 feet. Impacts were found to vary in an inverse proportion to its distance from an open route. Near the edge of an open route (0-20 feet), an average of 2.70 OHV impacts (tracks and trails) per 20 linear feet were found. Further from the trail impacts tapered off to an average of 0.87 per 20 linear feet.

Twenty-one signed, closed routes were raked on December 15, 1991. Five of the signs marking these trails had been vandalized. When 16 of the trails were rechecked 34 days later, 206 new OHV tracks were found with a mean of 13 tracks per closed route.

Unauthorized OHV activity was observed during both survey periods. In one instance, a group of about eight OHV riders were observed riding on unmarked trails. In another instance a truck and motorcycle were observed riding on a signed, closed route.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) policies limiting vehicle use to signed, open routes are ineffective. Intensive, negative impacts to desert tortoise habitat are occurring as a result. Only a small fraction of unauthorized trails (7%) are marked as closed. Even on the trails marked as closed, unauthorized use is continuing. Results from 37 transects suggest that unauthorized OHV impacts are related to open routes with these impacts decreasing as the distance from the open route increased.

LEVELS OF UNAUTHORIZED VEHICLE USE

BLM instructions governing OHV activities are not being heeded. As a result, significant degradation of tortoise habitat is occurring. Unauthorized use is astoundingly high. From trail and track mapping, an average of 47 unauthorized tracks per linear mile was found. This estimate is low since single tracks not associated with a trail and trails with fewer than 5 tracks were not recorded. A more accurate estimate of unauthorized tracks is derived from the data set of 37 transects. On the average, one unauthorized track was encountered every 20 linear feet. This represents an intensive, negative impact to the habitat of a federally listed species.

Transect data also reveal a relationship between open routes and unauthorized OHV impacts. Impacts are highest close to the open route, suggesting that the presence of an open route may induce negative impacts for substantial distances from the route edge. Even at 500-feet from an open route, unauthorized tracks were observed at a rate of almost one per 20 linear feet. These impacts are apparently difficult to control.

Marking routes as "closed" is an ineffective measure against trespassing. The contrary seems to be the case. Five of twenty-one signs on closed routes were vandalized. The degree of trespassing is intensive. An average of 11 tracks were found per closed route.

REFERENCES

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- U.S. Bureau of Land Management. 1980. The California Desert Conservation Area Plan. U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Riverside, California. 173 pp.
- U.S. Bureau of Land Management. 1989. U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Temporary emergency quarantine in the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and western Rand Mountain Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Federal Register 54(181).
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Distribution of Upper Respiratory Tract Disease in California in 1990

The following is one in a series of articles on papers presented at the Desert Tortoise Council's Annual Meeting and Symposium held this year in Las Vegas.

In 1990 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) surveyed several populations of desert tortoises to determine the incidence of Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD). Five permanent study plots (at Lucerne Valley, Johnson Valley, Ivanpah Valley, Goffs and Chuckwalla Bench) were surveyed using the standard, 60-day spring survey method. In addition, special disease surveys were completed on three BLM permanent study plots (at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area Interpretive Center and Interior and one in Fremont Valley) for determining the incidence of URTD and estimating mortality rates. These surveys were conducted with an effort of approximately person-days per square mile. Additional areas were surveyed for incidence of disease on the Chuckwalla Bench (eight different sites, approximately 6.75 square miles) and in the Chemehuevi Valley (12 sites, approximately 11.5 square miles). These areas were surveyed for approximately 12 person-days per square mile. The total number of tortoises examined from all surveys was 892.

Incidence of URTD at areas in the western Mojave Desert ranged from 0% to 18% (i.e. two plots at the DTNA=18%, Fremont Valley=18%, Lucerne Valley=13%, Johnson Valley=0%). Populations in the eastern Mojave and northeastern Colorado Deserts exhibited no signs of URTD (Ivanpah Valley=0%, Goffs=0%, Chemehuevi Valley=0%). However 16% of tortoises monitored in the southern Colorado Desert at the Chuckwalla Bench showed signs of URTD.

Preliminary information on URTD in captive tortoises kept throughout urban area of the Mojave Desert (e.g. Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Bernardino, San Diego) suggest that captive tortoises are a potential reservoir of disease for wild tortoise populations in California. A focused educational program will be needed to prevent the epidemic spread of disease from infected captives to wild tortoise populations.

Research abstract by Harold W. Avery and Dr. Kristin H. Berry of the BLM California District

1991 Naturalists Selected

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is pleased to announce that Brian Jennings and Jackie Gooch will serve this spring as naturalists at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. This year's naturalists will utilize the Committee's Tortoise Discovery as their base of operations and will together staff the Natural Area full time through mid-June.

Bryan is a recent graduate in Zoology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has an extensive background in herpetology and has completed a number of research projects including papers titled "Shifts in relative abundance of rattlesnakes in a desert grassland," and "A desert grassland snake community: changes over thirty years." In addition to his duties at the Natural Area, he is also currently employed as a Curatorial Assistant at the UCSB Vertebrate Museum.

Jackie Gooch has been a resident of California City for the past three years and has developed an extensive interest in the local wildlife. She recently taught a ten week portrait class for the California City Community Center. Jackie has earned an Associate Arts Degree in Art with highest honors from Prince George Community College in Largo, Maryland.

The Committee welcomes Bryan and Jackie aboard and encourages you to visit them this spring at the Natural Area.

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.

Printed on Recycled Paper.

Newsletter Staff

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Roger Dale	Assistant Editor
Carol Panlaqui	Production Manager
Peggy Mills	Production Assist.
Bev Steveson	Photographer

Congressional 1992 Desert Tortoise Habitat Acquisition and Conservation Funding in Proposal Stage

Although progress has occurred in acquiring tortoise habitats, some ominous recent signs underscore the importance of tortoise conservationists redoubling efforts to lobby on behalf of Fiscal Year 1992 tortoise funds.

For example, for the first time last year, Congress did not appropriate all of the requested tortoise habitat acquisition and conservation funds. This year, the Bush Administration's proposed Interior Budget includes no funds for tortoise habitat acquisitions. Since the tortoise is listed under both federal and state law as a threatened species, it is imperative that Congress and the Bush Administration provide more generous funding to accomplish necessary tortoise habitat acquisitions and conservation tasks, according to Richard Spotts, California representative for Defenders of Wildlife.

Desert Tortoise Acquisitions

According to the BLM's 1992 Budget Briefing Paper on desert tortoise acquisitions, there is a need to acquire 200 acres of land in the DTNA in FY 1992 at an estimated value of \$200,000. Excerpts of the BLM briefing paper on habitat acquisitions follows:

Background and Present Status

The Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) and Chuckwalla Bench Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) are two critical wildlife management habitats where densities of desert tortoises are among the highest in the southwestern United States.

Since FY 1988, a total of \$2,800,000 has been appropriated for acquisitions in the DTNA with an additional \$2,500,00 earmarked for Chuckwalla Bench. With these funds we have made good progress in acquiring 6,000 acres of a total of 9,400 acres in the DTNA and 9,000 acres of primarily Category I habitat within the Chuckwalla Bench. Our acquisition accomplishments to date represent a joint effort with The Nature Conservancy and close

coordination with a number of advisory groups such as the California Desert Tortoise Technical Advisory Committee.

Following are FY 1992 funding proposals for the DTNA, Chuckwalla Bench and Category I habitat.

Desert Tortoise Natural Area

For the DTNA in FY 1992, there is a need to acquire 200 acres with an estimated value of \$200,000. These funds are presently not included in the President's budget request. This reflects a heavy reliance on exchange as the acquisition tool. Many of these acquisitions will involve relatively small parcels of less than 40 to 80 acres. The completion and processing of a multiple number of relatively small exchanges represents a complex and labor intensive workload. Accordingly, the acreage projection for FY 1992 has not been increased from our actual accomplishments in FY 1990 and 1991.

Chuckwalla Bench

In FY 1991 we are acquiring an additional 1,000 acres with \$700,000 that was provided in this year's appropriation. There continues to be a critical need to continue FY 1992 acquisition at about the same pace as in FY 1991. Accordingly, an additional need of \$700,000 has been identified as required to continue the desert tortoise habitat acquisition program on Chuckwalla Bench in FY 1992. We will also emphasize the alternative of exchanging for private inholdings within the Chuckwalla Bench ACEC. However, most landowners have expressed the preference of simply being "brought out."

Category I Habitat Acquisition

Outside the DTNA and Chuckwalla Bench there continues to be critical needs and opportunities to both exchange and acquire lands that represent Category I Habitat for the desert tortoise. In expanding the initiative, we will focus our acquisition efforts on areas such as the Ivanpah Valley and along the perimeter of the DTNA (west of Mojave and east of Highway 395). In FY 1992, we are projecting the

direct purchase of approximately 1,000 acres and exchanging approximately 3,600 acres. These accomplishments would require a proposed funding level of \$500,000 in FY 1992.

Desert Tortoise Research & Management

Research and management funding will help the BLM to administer tortoise habitat and accelerate its efforts to combat the upper respiratory disease syndrome now affecting severely damaged tortoise populations.

Background

Over the past 10-15 years we have significantly expanded our on-the-ground presence and protection of the tortoise through initiatives such as expansion of our ranger force and implementation of acquisition of critical habitat management plans. We have also been very successful in building our "challenge cost share" (matching non-Federal resources or funds with Bureau funding) contributions specifically for studies, research, public education, and monitoring activities benefitting the tortoise. For FY 1991 we have budgeted \$160,000 of California challenge share funding against a projected \$250,000 of contributed funding and resources. This funding is primarily "earmarked" for research involving disease studies and raven management. We are also anticipating further challenge cost share contributions in FY 1991 possibly exceeding \$250,000 in addition to those that have already been received. In FY 1990 our total contributed funding for the desert tortoise could well exceed \$400,000.

President Bush's FY 1992 Budget Request allots \$755,000. The Bureau foresees an additional \$1,195,000 in funding for programs such as environmental education, habitat rehabilitation, inventory and monitoring, research, management, planning and support. The President's budget proposal, for example, includes \$200,000 for disease study, while the Bureau estimates an additional \$225,000 needed.

How You Can Help

Please send letters to your Congressman and Senators Alan Cranston and John Seymour. Urge them to actively support a \$1,400,000 FY 1992

Interior Appropriation from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to BLM for continued willing-seller California desert tortoise habitat acquisitions. Inform them that this appropriation should be used as follows: \$700,000 for the Chuckwalla Bench ACEC, \$500,000 for Category I Habitat, and \$200,000 for the Desert Tortoise Natural Area.

Please send letter requesting Desert Tortoise Funding to the following persons:

The Honorable Sidney Y. Yates, Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior
House Committee on Appropriations
B-308 Rayburn House Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515-6023

The Honorable Bill Lowery
2433 Rayburn House Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515-0541

The Honorable Jerry Lewis
2312 Rayburn House Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515-0535

The Honorable William M. Thomas
2402 Rayburn House Office Bldg.
Washington D.C., 20515-0520

The Honorable George E. Brown, Jr.
2188 Rayburn House Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515-0536

The Honorable Alfred A. McCandless
2422 Rayburn House Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

Senator Alan Cranston
112 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510-0501

Senator John Seymour
902 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510-0503

Senator Robert C. Byrd, Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior
Senate Committee on Appropriations
122 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510-6025

The Honorable Manuel Lujan, Jr.
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

Member Support Urgently Needed

The Committee requests your support to compel the BLM to control OHV use in critical tortoise habitat.

In view of impending legal actions against the Bureau's reopening of the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley to recreational OHV use, the Committee requests your support. Please send your special and urgently needed donations to **DTPC Treasurer, P.O. Box 453, Ridgecrest, CA 93555.**

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