
Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Spring 2008 28:1

Spring Educational Outreach

By Melissa Nicholson



As Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. members, most of you are familiar with the three primary types of activities in which we actively participate: establishing Desert tortoise preserves, developing and implementing management programs for tortoise preserves and adjacent areas, and education and research. While these activities occur throughout the entire year, education is most exciting in the spring, when the Mojave Desert comes alive. Wildflowers bloom and blanket the hillsides with reds, yellows, purples, and oranges. Birds become active courting mates, building nests, and raising young. Desert tortoises can be seen basking in the sun, relaxing in the shade of a creosote bush, or foraging on a delicious desert wishbone bush. This burst of activity gets people outdoors and they become active, excited, and engaged in nature.

This spring, the DTPC participated in a number of exciting educational outreach opportunities and events. The first annual California Desert Nature Festival was held April 11th-13th at the Living Desert in Palm Desert, California. The choice of venue was ideal and for those of you who have never had the pleasure of a visit to the Living Desert, you should remedy that situation at your earliest convenience. The Living Desert is one of the most successful zoological parks in the country and offers visitors a complete introduction to the natural desert, including the Mojave and other deserts around the world. The Living Desert and the California Desert Nature Festival hosted the three day Party for the Planet Earth Day event. Attendees had the opportunity to learn about alternative fuel vehicles, saving energy, recycling, and preserving wild lands.

DTPC Preserve Manager Melissa Nicholson and volunteer Stephan Lorenz, California Turtle and Tortoise Club volunteers, and individuals representing Joshua Tree National Park manned an information booth which displayed the beautiful native wildflowers on which desert tortoises feed, educational brochures

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33rd Annual Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Meeting and Banquet

By Stephanie Pappas



2008 Banquet Attendees

This year the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) celebrated its 33rd Annual Banquet and Meeting. Every year in January the Committee invites all members, colleagues, and government agencies to join us for the afternoon and evening events. We were particularly pleased this year to see the diversity of interest groups and affiliates that attended this celebration.

During the business meeting welcomes and introductions included individuals from California Turtle and Tortoise Club (CTTC): High Desert Chapter, Mojave National Preserve (MNP), the Bureau of Land Management (Ridgecrest Field Office), Desert Tortoise Council, California Energy Commission (CEC), LA County Fish & Game Commission, and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Laura Stockton, DTPC Treasurer, gave an overview of the Committees' finances. Melissa Nicholson,

Preserve Manager, discussed recent projects at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA), restoration activities at Camp "C", reviewed the Naturalist Report, discussed recent grant awarded to the DTPC, and 2008 goals and objectives for the DTPC. Jun Lee, the DTPC's contract employee, gave a presentation on land acquisitions and mitigations in 2007, discussed the importance of the DTPC acquiring additional parcels in 2008, and current fencing projects. Hector Villalobos, of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) reviewed Solar Energy proposals. Bob Parker (BLM) reviewed important impact issues pertaining to the Desert tortoise and its habitat. He also discussed replacement of signs at the entrance of the DTNA, funding for the 2008 DTNA Naturalist Program, realignment of the DTNA entrance area and the new BLM Ranger, Brian Martin, stationed in California City.

A period for open discussions and comments followed the formal presentations. Debra Hughson and Dennis Schramm from the Mojave National Preserve (MNP) gave an overview of their activities at MNP in 2007 and goals for 2008. The MNP



Hector Villalobos (BLM)



Telephone: (951) 683-3872
Fax: (951) 683-6949
E-mail: <dtpc@pacbell.net>
<http://www.tortoise-tracks.org>

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Founded 1974

Preserve Manager and Office Administrator
Melissa Nicholson

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is a unit of the National Park System in the eastern Mojave Desert of California. It has a varied landscape of about 1.6 million acres. The MNP has an interesting history and it was a pleasure to have these individuals speak at our annual meeting.



MNP Representatives: Neal Darby, Debra Hughson, Bob Bryson, and Director Dennis Schramm

Following the afternoon meetings and discussions additional banquet attendees arrived for the evening event which began with a social hour where DTPC board members mingled with guests and prepared for the evening events.

Highlights of the evening events included a silent auction and a sale of items from the Walter Allen Estate (donated by the CTTC: Orange County Chapter), Special Guest Speaker Dr. Ken Nagy, and the DTPC 2007 Special Awards.

The Guest Speaker, Dr. Ken Nagy grew up in Southern California and was fascinated with the reptiles he saw along the coast and in the Mojave Desert. He earned a Ph.D. at the University of California, Riverside in 1971, studying Chuckwalla ecophysiology, and has been on the faculty at UCLA doing desert biology since that time.

Dr. Nagy's talk, "Conserving Desert Tortoises by Head-starting Juveniles," described ways to help tortoise populations recover and persist by increasing the number of young tortoises recruited into natural populations. Improving survivorship of eggs and of whole nests, and enhancing juvenile body



Dr. Nagy with Tortoise Tracker Walking Stick

condition, and growth rate are key to successful head-start programs. Attendees listened with enthusiasm as Dr. Nagy discussed results from ongoing studies at several military bases in the Mojave Desert and many questions followed after his presentation.

Dr. Nagy was awarded the Tortoise Tracker Walking Stick award for his dedication and research involving the desert tortoise. The DTPC hopes the walking stick can see Dr. Nagy through many more journeys to study the creatures of the desert. We thank him for all his contributions to the education and research of the tortoise and the ecosystem in which he lives.

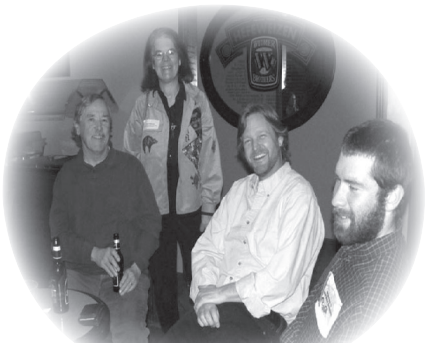


Dr. Ken Nagy and his wife Patty Nagy

Earth Share of California (ESCA) was awarded the Large Photo Plaque this year. ESCA is comprised of extraordinary individuals working to improve California's natural heritage. The ESCA offers business partners the opportunity to connect with the most respected organizations in California. They are a leading fund-raising federation in the U.S., representing more than 80 diverse environmental groups. ESCA members comprise the most diverse coalition of environmental organizations in California.

One of ESCA major accomplishments in 2007, was the implementation of a reusable shopping bag program in cooperation with Ralph's Supermarkets. The reusable shopping bag promotion offers an earth friendly alternative to plastic bags. It is estimated

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B. Parker BLM, J. McEwan (DTPC), R. Gartland BLM, B. Hughes (SCA)



Paul Im and Pat Smith (Executive Director) of ESCA accepting the Photo Plaque Award

that Americans use 14 billion plastic bags annually. Petroleum is used for the production of plastic bags that don't biodegrade and often find their way into oceans and other waterways. For every reusable bag sold at Ralph's \$0.50 is donated to ESCA. Environmental charities, such as the DTPC, benefit from this program and others that the ESCA have supported throughout the years.

The DTPC formed a partnership with ESCA in the 1980's. The DTPC is able to achieve many of our on-going recovery efforts and continues our public outreach program with the support of ESCA. In appreciation of the two decades of support, it was with great pleasure that the DTPC presented Patricia Smith, the executive Director of Earth Share California, with this award. Pat was a primary individual involved in the implementation of the Ralphs reusable shopping bag promotion program. This is only one of many accomplishments that Pat and the ESCA achieved last year.

Although unable to attend, Rebecca (Becky) Jones of the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) was honored at the banquet with the Golden Tortoise Award. Becky is an Environmental Scientist that has been working in the Eastern Sierra and Inland Desert Region for many years. She has been instrumental in providing guidance, technical analyses, and reviews of documents aimed at the recovery of the desert tortoise. The DTPC thanks Becky for her on-going and extraordinary efforts. We were sorry she could not accept this award in person.

New Grant Opportunities

The Community Foundation is a non-profit, public charity established in 1941 by and for the people of Riverside and San Bernardino counties of California. The Community Foundation works to connect donors with the causes that they care about. Each year, The Community Foundation awards millions of dollars in scholarships and grants to different educational, cultural, and humanitarian organizations. Donors to the Community Foundation have a variety of giving options including the establishment of permanent endowments or donating to funds that have already been established. Examples of these funds include the Community Impact Fund, Fields of Interest Fund, and Advancing the Arts in Coachella Valley.

The Desert Legacy Fund-Conservation Grant, another of The Community Foundation's grant programs, supports research that contributes to the understanding and conservation of California's desert ecosystems. On May 7th the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. (DTPC) had the honor of being awarded a grant from the Desert Legacy Fund. This fund was established by an anonymous donor and in the past has been awarded to the Joshua Tree National Park Association, to the Natural Science Collaborative, and to Friends of the Inyo.

The DTPC was awarded a total of \$2,900 to support our Multi-Media Environmental Education Program that will be focused in the counties of Riverside and San Bernardino. Other projects supported by the Desert Legacy Fund-Conservation Grant include: a study of the Camel Spider, which is an important indicator species for the overall health of desert ecosystems; an analysis of the effectiveness of current land management of the Death Valley area for the purpose of making recommendations to preserve unique geologic formations; a study of the algal species in the soils of Joshua Tree National Park; and a study of the Velvet Ant across portions of the Southern California deserts. The DTPC is proud to have been chosen as recipients of these funds and looks forward to spreading knowledge and awareness of the Desert Tortoise and conservation of its habitat.

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Tortoise story time at the Desert Nature Festival about tortoises and raven control, and free stickers, tattoos, bookmarks, and magnets. Adults and children were educated about proper procedures when encountering a tortoise in the wild, how to tell male tortoises apart from females, what to feed captive tortoises, and how to legally adopt tortoises and other turtles. Children were invited to sit and listen to stories about turtles and tortoises all over the world. Approximately 700 hundred individuals visited the booth! The star of the show was Mojave Max, a life-sized version of the cartoon desert tortoise that provides people with information about many desert species. Mojave Max spent his three days wandering the Living Desert facility. It is estimated that he contacted 1,400 individuals during the event (to learn more about Mojave Max visit www.mojavemax.com). This was the first year for the California Desert Nature Festival. However, many other annual events have been hosted throughout the Mojave Desert for decades.

This year California City hosted its 40th annual Desert Tortoise Days. This event takes place the first weekend of May and is a critical link between the citizens of California City and the DTPC due to the city's proximity to the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. A parade made its way downtown on Saturday May 3rd. Afterward, people adjourned to Central Park where the music, fun, and both vending and educational booths were located. The DTPC Preserve Manager and volunteer Chuck Hemingway

manned a booth with literature, fun activities for enthusiastic kids, and other materials pertaining to the desert tortoise and Desert Tortoise Natural Area. An estimated 200 hundred people visited the DTPC booth. The following Sunday, May 4th, the DTNA had a higher than expected visitation when compared to other Sundays during the season. This indicates that the effort to inform individuals about the DTNA during Desert Tortoise Days was successful.

The DTPC also participated in the Antelope Valley Conservancy's Third Annual Endangered Species Day Conference on Friday, May 16th. Endangered Species Day is an opportunity for people of all ages to learn about the importance of protecting endangered species. It educates people on the everyday actions they can take to help protect our nation's disappearing wildlife and the habitats that these animals occupy. Each year, on the third Friday of May, thousands of people throughout the country celebrate Endangered Species Day at parks, wildlife refuges, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, libraries, schools and community centers.

This year the Endangered Species Day Conference was held at Antelope Valley College. Speakers gave short, informative presentations to an audience composed of students, concerned citizens, biologists, and members of the press. Speakers were from the following state and federal agencies and non-profit organizations: US Fish and Wildlife Service, Edwards Air Force Base, Angeles National Forest, California Department of Fish and Game, California State Parks, the Desert Managers Group, the Mountain Lion Foundation, the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, and the Antelope Valley Conservancy.



The DTPC Supporting CTTC Valley Chapter's Annual Turtle and Tortoise Show in Woodland Hills, California

Calendar of Events

August 9th: The CTTC Inland Empire Chapter is hosting their Annual Turtle and Tortoise Show in Redlands. Visit www.tortoise.org/inlandempire for more information.

October 18-19th: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee hosts its Annual Fall Work Party. Please contact Preserve Manager, Melissa Nicholson, for additional information (call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail dtpc@pacbell.net).

October 25-26th: The Desert Tortoise Council Tortoise Handling Workshop will be held in Ridgecrest, California. To register please e-mail tracy.bailey@mchsi.com. Space is limited.

Special thanks to the following for their contributions to the DTPC:

The Thomas Family Living Trust

The Laird Hayes Family

Freeman Baldwin & Family

Steven & Leslie Hartman

Richard & Myrna Kettler

Bruce & Cynthia Gaya

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Donations in memory of:

Betty Forgey

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The Walter Allen Estate,
from Orange County Chpt. of California Turtle
And Tortoise Club

Kinky the Desert Tortoise, from Jaci Pappas

Edwards Head Start Program

By Mark Bratton



Desert Tortoise Head Starting Pen

Many people have heard of the nationally funded Head Start Program. Edwards Air Force Base has their own version of this federally funded program that fewer people know about. While the federal program is aimed at children, the Edwards Head Start Program is aimed at improving the survivorship (probability of living to a certain age) of another group of youngsters: desert tortoises under the age of seven. The desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) is listed as threatened both in the state of California and federally. Since the late 1980's, desert tortoise populations in the Mojave Desert have been on a steady decline. The Head Start Program was developed to increase the numbers of local tortoises by improving the survivorship of these hatchlings.

One of the first tasks for the Head Start program was for tortoise researchers and Base wildlife volunteers to construct large covered enclosures. The designated area for the enclosures was specifically chosen based on the fact that tortoises were known to occur on that area of Edwards Air Force Base. Researchers then searched for female tortoises in the wild population. These females were then brought back from the field and x-rayed to determine if they were gravid (carrying developing eggs). Gravid females were placed in the enclosures, allowed to deposit their eggs, and then released at their original

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All contributors receive the quarterly newsletter *Tortoise Tracks*.

Membership and donor information are kept confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties.

I WANT TO VOLUNTEER

My area of interest/expertise is:

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capture point with radio transmitters so they can be found, recaptured, and used in the program next year.

After 80 to 120 days of incubation the baby tortoises hatch out of their eggs and are allowed to move about within the enclosures. These baby tortoises will be released at different times over a period of years but could be held within the enclosure up to seven years. After they are released into the wild, their survivorship will be tracked to determine the best age of release.

Why hold the tortoises for years? In the wild, it can take up to seven years for a tortoise's shell to harden. In these early years, young tortoises are very vulnerable to predators due to their small size and lack of protection because of their soft shell. Baby tortoise predators include, but are not limited to: ravens, birds of prey, snakes, coyote, desert kit fox, dogs, and ants. In fact, it is estimated that only 1 or 2 tortoises out of every 100 hatchlings make it to adulthood (and you thought you had it rough!) Therefore, researchers are hoping that holding these baby tortoises within a protected enclosure for their early years in life may give them a "head start" and increase their survivorship.

Researchers are hoping to relocate the same adult

females next year using the radio transmitters attached to the tortoises and repeat this whole process for the next five years. This program will continue for 12 years: five years of using females to produce captive young and seven years holding the young tortoises in pens. Long term studies are needed because it takes 15 to 20 years for juvenile tortoises to reach sexual maturity in the wild. Therefore, the result of the study at Edwards will not be known for many years. Captive breeding programs have been very successful with other animal species including the black-footed ferret, the red wolf, and the California Condor. If the Edwards Head Start Program is successful, it potentially may be used throughout the Mojave to supplement natural tortoise populations that have declined over the years.





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