

---

---

# Tortoise Tracks

---

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Summer 2008 28:2

---

## Poaching at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area



Despite fencing, patrols, and the best efforts of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's volunteers and employees, there is evidence that a tortoise was poached from within the interior of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) this spring. The tortoise in question was first seen foraging during the third week of May by Charles Hemingway, long-time Committee volunteer, as he completed a regular fence check along the southern boundary of the DTNA. After a thorough check of the area, an active pallet was discovered. Tortoises use pallets (shallow, temporary burrows) in the spring, summer, and fall. This particular pallet was located approximately 10 feet within the interior of the DTNA. Due to this particular tortoise's proximity to the fence and a high-OHV traffic area, Mr. Hemingway decided to add the tortoise to his regular patrol.

It was on Mr. Hemingway's second visit to the area when he discovered evidence of poaching. The most obvious sign that poaching had occurred was the fact that the fence itself was damaged. The uppermost strands of wire were pressed down, as if a person or several people had climbed over the fence. Upon closer inspection, tire tracks were observed that stopped in front of the fence. The tracks appeared to belong to an ATV. Human footprints were also clearly visible within the interior of the DTNA. The pallet itself had been destroyed. Large chunks were ripped out of the top of the burrow, apparently to expose the tortoise that was concealed within. There were no signs of the tortoise.

This incident was reported to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, the Bureau of Land Management (Ridgecrest Field Office), California Department of Fish and Game, and the Law Enforcement Division of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Unfortunately there is little that any of these entities can do due to the fact that there were no witnesses to the incident.

Continues on page 4

---

---

# DTPC SPRING WORK PARTY

By Melissa Nicholson



The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) sponsored its Annual Spring Work Party on March 29, 2008. This event began similarly to other work parties held in the past. Volunteers met at the Interpretive Center of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA). A hard day of labor was preceded by delicious doughnuts generously donated by Laura Stockton, Treasurer of the DTPC. Volunteers were then split into two groups. One group spent the better part of an hour raking the parking lot to remove the deep trenches that were created when vehicles entered or left the parking area at high speeds. The second group was deployed at the entrance of the DTNA. These volunteers repaired and reinstalled signs that were damaged previously by vandals. After the completion of these major tasks, the two groups of volunteers were reunited and caravanned to Camp "C" to work on the plant restoration project that was begun in December of 2007. Several major tasks were accomplished at the five acre restoration site. Of the most immediate importance was the completion of the monthly watering at Camp "C". The regular and accurate watering



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

### Board of Trustees

President	Stephanie Pappas
1st Vice President	Mark Hagan
2nd Vice President	Jane McEwan
3rd Vice President	Mark Bratton
Treasurer	Laura Stockton
Recording Secretary	Mark Massar
Board Member	Kristin Berry, Ph.D.





**Volunteers repairing vandalized signs**

of the project area is generally a difficult and time consuming task. With the help of this hard working group of volunteers a task which usually takes two individuals an entire day was completed in one hour! The group also collected two truck loads of rock which were used to reinforce the previously constructed micro-catchment islands. These islands are constructed to improve the rate of water capture in the arid desert environment. Additionally, volunteers removed large amounts of garbage and debris from the area and collected vertical mulching materials that will be used during the next phase of the restoration. The day ended where it began, at the Interpretive Center of the DTNA. The volunteers were then led on a tour of the DTNA where a large male desert tortoise was spotted enjoying the shade of his burrow. A perfect end to a great day!

The DTPC would like to recognize all 15 of the volunteers from the 2008 Spring Work Party. Collectively, this group spent 53 hours traveling to the DTNA and 87 hours working at the DTNA which culminated in a total of 140 volunteers hours logged during the Spring Work Party. The DTPC could never have met our Work Party goals without the tireless efforts and contributions from the following people: Freeman Baldwin & Freeman Heap-Baldwin, Robert Redfoot, Allan McKinna, Ernie Messner, Buddy & Christina Martin, Kim & Tony Vespa, Timothy Kirkpatrick, Chuck Hemingway, Robert Parker, Shelley Ellis, Laura Stockton, and Mark Bratton.

Most DTPC work parties are scheduled as two day events with interested participants camping over night at Pilot Knob. However, we did not have enough volunteer response to schedule a second day



of work at the spring work party. We do hope to do so next year.

If you would like to be involved with work parties in the future or need additional information please contact Melissa Nicholson at [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net) or call (951) 683-3872. The DTPC welcomes all members and any non-member to join us during our Annual Work Parties. More participation translates into more fun and more on-the-ground action to aid in the recovery of the desert tortoise! We hope to see you soon.



**BLM Wildlife Biologist Bob Parker collecting vertical mulching materials**

## Desert Tortoise Found Burned to Death

The burned remains of a desert tortoise were discovered August 4<sup>th</sup> in a fire grate at the Black Rock campground at Joshua Tree National Park. According to the park news release the animal was approximately 45 years old. As many of you know, desert tortoises are a threatened species, protected since 1990 by the federal Endangered Species Act as well as state wildlife laws. The desert tortoise is also California's official state reptile. California's population of desert tortoises has declined by as much as 90 percent since the 1970s. "There are places in the Mojave Desert where the tortoise is wiped out completely," said Bureau of Land Management Wildlife Biologist and Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Secretary Mark Massar. Tortoises have been indiscriminately killed for years by passing vehicles, human subsidized predators such as ravens and coyotes, domesticated dogs, and disease. While all of these losses are tragic none of them are the result of intentional acts. This particular tortoise was subjected to unimaginable pain and cruelty. "We are all truly sickened by this incident," said one U. S. Geological Service Wildlife Biologist. According to the Endangered Species Act of 1973, anyone found guilty of harming a protected species is subject to criminal penalties of up to one year in federal prison and \$50,000 in fines. Civil penalties of up to \$25,000 for each violation may also be imposed. Joe Zarki, information officer for Joshua Tree NP, says rangers are seeking information from anyone who knows anything related to the death of this desert tortoise. If you have any information on the incident you can call (760) 367-5541.

Continued from page 1

The tragedy of this incident is that after decades of informing the public that taking tortoises from the wild is illegal, it still occurs. Removing desert tortoises from the wild is illegal and prosecutable by law. Fines of \$50,000 can be placed on individuals who are caught.

Research of long-lived species, such as the desert tortoise, indicate that the removal of even one healthy adult can lead to the extirpation (local extinction) of a species from the area.

If you have any information regarding this poaching incident please call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net). Any information is welcome and your identity can remain confidential.

If people want to have a desert tortoise as a pet there is no need to poach native wild desert tortoises. There are hundreds of captive desert tortoises currently in need of good homes under a state managed program. For individuals interested in legally adopting tortoises, contact the California Turtle and Tortoise Club ([www.tortoise.org](http://www.tortoise.org)) and please spread the word!

By Melissa Nicholson



### Twentynine Palms Withdrawal Application- Public Meeting: Times and Locations

*Date: October 23, 2008*

*Time: 4:00 pm-9:00 pm*

*Location:*

*Hay's Gym, Twentynine Palms Junior High  
5798 Utah Trail, Twentynine Palms, CA*

*Date: October 24, 2008*

*Time: 1:00 pm-4:00 pm and 6:00 pm-9:00 pm*

*Location:*

*Hilton Garden Inn  
12603 Mariposa Road, Victorville, CA*



## Proposed Twentynine Palms Expansion

The federal government is evaluating more than 400,000 acres of public and private land for an addition to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has issued a Notice of Proposed Legislative Withdrawal to enable the eventual transfer of 365,906 acres of fragile public land in the Mojave Desert. The acreage of the proposed expansion is roughly two-thirds the size of the existing training center located in San Bernardino County. Marine Corp officials say they need more territory for weapons testing, live ammunition exercises, and tank training. The expansion would create a training area large enough for three battalions (approximately 3,000 soldiers) to maneuver. If the Marines get approval, expanded training exercises are expected to begin as early as 2015.

The proposed expansion area encompasses an array of geological features including Bristol Dry Lake, Amboy Crater and the surrounding lava fields, the Sheep Hole Mountains, Cadiz Valley, and borders several wilderness areas. The area includes habitat critical to the survival of the threatened desert tortoise and desert bighorn sheep, who use a portion of the lands in the eastern expansion area as a corridor between wilderness areas.

This proposed expansion is the



**Photograph courtesy of Brian Blackwelder**

latest in a string of threats to the Mojave Desert and specifically to the desert tortoise. Tortoise populations are declining throughout their range, particularly in the West Mojave, where much of the expansion is slated to occur. Population declines have resulted from a variety of factors including disease, predation by human subsidized predators, crushing by vehicles, habitat degradation, and collection from the wild. The most critical factor affecting tortoise populations is direct loss of habitat due to suburban and military development. This proposed expansion will likely lead to additional large-scale desert tortoise relocations. Approximately 1,000 desert tortoises were experimentally relocated this spring as a result of the 150,000-acre expansion of the Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, near Barstow. So far that effort has resulted in unexpectedly high tortoise mortality rates.

The BLM and the Marine Corp will host public meetings on October 23<sup>rd</sup> in Twentynine Palms and October 24<sup>th</sup> in Victorville to present the proposal for possible expansion and to discuss the legislative withdrawal process of the public lands in San Bernardino County. Stephen Razo is the contact for the meeting and can be reached at (951) 697-5217. The Federal Notice published on September 15<sup>th</sup> segregated the public lands identified for possible expansion for two years. Under the segregation, the lands are no longer available for settlement, sale, or location of claims under the mining laws. The lands remain open to public access and recreation. The notice is available online at [www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/info/fed\\_reg\\_archives.html](http://www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/info/fed_reg_archives.html). This publication opens a 90-day comment period regarding the proposed withdrawal.

## Mojave Max Passes

Avid Tortoise Tracks readers may remember the human-sized, plush version of the popular tortoise and educator Mojave Max that graced the cover of the spring edition of the newsletter. The real Mojave Max, an approximately 65 year old desert tortoise, resided at the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. He was the representative of the Clark County Desert Conservation Program since 1991 and the Mojave Max Education Program.

Like other desert tortoises, Mojave Max entered a burrow to hibernate every winter and emerged every spring. Unlike an average desert tortoise, Max's annual emergence was hailed by thousands of students in Nevada and California who have been studying Mojave Desert weather, temperatures, and conditions to estimate when Max would emerge. Students entered their guesses about the time of Max's emergence on-line and then waited for the southwest's version of Punxsutawney Phil to get his first peek at springtime. This contest is just one component of a desert-wide education program.

Mojave Max has emerged as early as February 14th during his nine-year tenure. This year, after months of anticipation, Max emerged from his burrow at 11:27 a.m. on April 14<sup>th</sup>. It was officially his latest emergence on record. Max died of natural causes on June 30<sup>th</sup>.

Despite Max's passing the Education Program and Emergence Contest will continue and a new Mojave Max was recently chosen. The new Max is a healthy 19-year old male who was turned in to the Clark County desert tortoise pick-up service in 2005. He will reside at the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center while the desert tortoise habitat is being remodeled at Red Rocks National Conservation Area.

## Calendar of Events

October 25-26th: The Desert Tortoise Council Tortoise Handling Workshop will be held in Ridgecrest, California. Registration is full.

November 3rd: Public comments due on the Draft Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan.

January 10th: Executive Board meeting of the California Turtle and Tortoise Club.

January 17-19th: The California Native Plant Society's 2009 Conservation Conference: Strategies and Solutions. For more information please visit the CNPS homepage ([www.cnps.org](http://www.cnps.org)).

January 24th: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's 34th Annual Banquet held in Lancaster, California. For more information please call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net)

February 19-22nd: The 34th Desert Tortoise Council Annual Meeting and Symposium. Visit [www.deserttortoise.org](http://www.deserttortoise.org) for more info.

## Volunteer Opportunities

Many DTPC members express regret that they can not participate in either of the Work Parties that are scheduled each spring and fall due to fitness level, distance from the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, or previous commitments. The DTPC has numerous, on-going volunteer opportunities throughout the region including Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties. If you are interested in seeing how your skills match our needs please call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net).

## DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE

## MEMBERSHIP/DONOR FORM

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
 CITY \_\_\_\_\_  
 STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
 RENEWAL ☐  
 NEW ☐

Individual membership \$ 15 annually [ ]  
 Family membership \$ 20 annually [ ]  
 Sponsor membership \$ 30 annually [ ]  
 Benefactor membership \$ 75 annually [ ]  
 Patron membership \$100 annually [ ]  
 Life \$500 [ ]

Membership Dues \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Additional Donation \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Total Enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

## DONATION ONLY

Enclosed is my donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to DTPC and mail to:

DTPC  
 4067 Mission Inn Avenue  
 Riverside, CA 92501

The DTPC is an IRS recognized tax-exempt 501 (c)(3) nonprofit corporation. All contributions above the basic \$15 annual membership dues are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

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:

\_\_\_\_\_

My E-mail address is:

\_\_\_\_\_

## Draft Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan Updates

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has posted a Notice of Availability of the Draft Revised Recovery Plan for the threatened Mojave population of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), which was protected under the Endangered Species Act nearly two decades ago. Though desert tortoise populations have continued to crash since the listing, the new draft plan weakens protections and provides few on-the-ground actions for tortoise conservation. In place of providing immediate firm protections for the tortoise, the draft plan proposes a time-consuming process of monitoring and adaptive management. The plan provides vague descriptions of recovery actions and fails to make use of the most recent available scientific literature. For example, recent population genetics studies have identified the desert tortoise in the western portion of the Mojave Desert as distinctly different from tortoises in the northern, eastern, and southern portions. The draft plan also fails to address many of the scientifically recognized threats to the desert tortoise including disease, roads, off-highway vehicles, grazing, invasive weed proliferation, increased fire risk, and other causes of habitat degradation. This recovery plan may replace a more rigorous and science-based recovery plan that was published in 1994. The draft plan was published on August 4, 2008 in the Federal Register. This opened a 90-day public comment information period that will end on November 3, 2008. Copies of the Draft Recovery Plan are available at [www.fws.gov/nevada](http://www.fws.gov/nevada). Comments and information on the Draft Revised Recovery Plan may be e-mailed to [dtrecovery@fws.gov](mailto:dtrecovery@fws.gov). The DTPC is working in coordination with the Desert Tortoise Council to draft comments to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service addressing the shortcomings in the draft recovery plan.



## Tortoise Tracks

NONPROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
RIVERSIDE, CA  
PERMIT NO. 3216

THE DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE  
4067 MISSION INN AVENUE  
RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA 92501

Address Service Requested



*The event will be held at the Signature Best Western Antelope Valley Inn, the same venue as the 2008 Banquet, but with a new banquet staff and chef. We are looking forward to a delicious meal, a fabulous speaker, and a fun night. Please check your next issue of Tortoise Tracks for detailed information.*

JOIN US!!  
The DTPC's 34th Annual  
Meeting & Banquet  
January 24, 2009