
Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Fall 2009 29:3



Photo by Robert Villa: 2009 Naturalist Robert Villa observing a desert horned lizard at the DTNA

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's (DTPC) 2009 Naturalist Season was considered a great success at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTNA). The Bureau of Land Management, our partners in management at the DTNA, graciously provided a trailer which served as the Desert Tortoise Exhibit Center for the second year in a row. New exhibits were displayed along with current information regarding the desert tortoise, its habitat, as well as other denizens of the southwestern United States.

Naturalist duties were split between Edward Patrovsky, a long-time friend and member of the DTPC, and Robert Villa, a young herpetologist from Tucson, Arizona. Robert served as the full-time Naturalist and really enjoyed his time in the western Mojave. He compared the habitat with his home in the Sonoran Desert: "The Mohave this year is absolutely splendid with wildflowers! Flowers that haven't bloomed for years are now in bloom; desert candles, Persian princes, desert blue bells, filaree, blue dicks, lupine and goldfields. Never have I seen such a thick carpet of gold yellow!" Approximately 1200 people visited the DTNA this spring, the highest number since 2005, when the Mojave Desert literally came alive with color during an extraordinary wildflower bloom.

There was a 20 percent increase in off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreationist visitation at the DTNA this spring. In 2008, 46 percent of visitors arrived on an OHV. This year 66 percent, more than half of the visitors to the DTNA, arrived on an OHV. This is a significant change in usage patterns at the DTNA and serves as an excellent opportunity for the Naturalists to teach OHV enthusiasts about responsible recreation and preserving the Mojave Desert ecosystem. Robert remarked on the beauty of the sunset at the Natural Area: "It's that rich hour for the eyes. The sun has just set behind the Sierra Nevadas and I indulge in the last few rays of light that are a dark and aquamarine as it infuses from purple to the dark ink of night. I didn't reach for the camera since it would do no justice to the event whatsoever."

San Diego Zoo Expands into the Las Vegas Valley Zoo, which took over research center in March, offers a rare glimpse into endangered species conservation



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Biologist Kim Field displays two desert tortoise hatchlings recently born at the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center.

The San Diego Zoo has moved into the Las Vegas Valley to study and help repopulate the desert with desert tortoises. The center recently held a media day to highlight some of the changes at the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center (DTCC), which it took over in March. “The overall vision for the DTCC is to play a critical role in conserving and restoring wild desert tortoise populations and their native desert habitat,” said Allison Alberts, chief conservation officer for the San Diego Zoo’s Institute for Conservation Research.

The zoo plans to use the center for researching, breeding and raising tortoises, training new research-

ers and educating the public, Alberts said.

It has hired five full-time employees to work at the center and has five seasonal workers helping inventory the animals. Additionally, staff members from the zoo in San Diego occasionally come to the center for training, research and to help in medical procedures. “We are going to play, I hope, a really significant role in recovering the species because one of the things that we can do is rehabilitate these tortoises and put them back into the wild,” said Paula Kahn, who manages the center for the zoo.

The zoo has plenty of experience working with endangered species, breeding them in captivity and then releasing them to the wild. Alberts cited the zoo’s work with the California condor whose population was once limited to just 22 living birds. Now there are more than 350 of the birds and half of them live in the wild. That is just one example of the more than 100 conservation programs run by the zoo in 35 countries.

Las Vegas’ close proximity to San Diego was an extra incentive for the zoo to get involved in the tortoise program here. “We do work globally, but we also feel a strong obligation and interest in work on local conservation issues in the Southwest,” Alberts said. And it was the zoo’s work with other endangered species in the area that led to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) approaching the zoo about a new partnership. “It was kind of a natural fit for San Diego and FWS to work on this together,” Alberts said.

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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

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Roy Averill-Murray, the FWS desert tortoise recovery coordinator, said the zoo's experience with conservation is going to be a key to success in the program. "Desert tortoise recovery in general is a big task and we need a lot of partners, a lot of expertise," said Averill-Murray. "With a facility like this where we're receiving a lot of tortoises, having their expertise just from a captive husbandry standpoint is huge."

The center was established in 1990. In 2007, the FWS took over the facility, which is on more than 11,000 acres managed by the Bureau of Land Management. "We're really optimistic to get some new projects going and really capitalize on the collective expertise," Averill-Murray said. "It really is a cause for optimism to do some good things for desert tortoise recovery."

Desert tortoises were listed as threatened species in 1989, but many people already had them as pets and were allowed to keep them. It is illegal to take a tortoise from the wild or to release a captive tortoise. The center takes in tortoises turned in by people who no longer want them as pets or when they are found injured in the wild. More than 1,000 tortoises come to the center each year. Since it opened, the center has released 8,000 tortoises to the wild.

The zoo hopes to dramatically increase that number and study the animals further to make sure the ones they release survive. The zoo also hopes to use the center to help people learn more about the animals and to teach proper care for those who have them. "The center has a great potential to contribute to public education, both about what's going on in the wild and about the issue of pet tortoises," Alberts said.

Plans are in the works for school field trips and other small groups to visit the center. The center isn't open to the public because of the need to quarantine many of the animals, but staff members do sometimes take the animals with them to speaking engagements. And in the distant future, the center could turn into something even larger, perhaps even something of a tourist destination for people interested in the animals. "If you really think big about the future vision of the DTCC it could become a real hub for education about the Mojave ecosystem in general," Alberts said. "That's something we would definitely love to look for in the long term future of the place."

Las Vegas Sun, Published September 25, 2009. Written by Kyle Hansen. Photo credit also belongs to Kyle Hansen.

BLM Extends Rand Mountain Education & Permit Program

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Ridgecrest Field Office is extending Phase I of the Rand Mountain Management Area (RMMA) Education and Permit Program until October 1, 2010. The RMMA permit program was born out of a necessity to address the complex management issues in the Rand Mountain area in regards to critical desert tortoise habitat and avid off-highway vehicle use. The goal of the program is to increase compliance with rules and regulations of the sensitive, Rand Mountains limited use area. Heavy focus is on designated route system compliance. During the past 12 months, BLM, the Student Conservation Association, Friends of Jawbone, and the California City Police Department, have combined forces on holiday weekends to conduct permit outreach in and around the Rand Mountain area. Users are introduced to the new permit system, given a short narrative on the purpose and requirements, and then issued a free permit. The BLM recently secured funding and staff to develop Phase II of the program. Phase II, anticipated to take effect in 2010, will require the user to complete an education program and then purchase a permit. Until Phase II is developed, Phase I will be in effect and the original permits will remain valid. The Phase I permits can be obtained from the Ridgecrest Field Office staff, at the Jawbone Station, or the California City Police Department. Additional information on the permit program is available at: http://www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/ridgecrest/rand_mountain_management.html or by contacting Carrie Woods: (760)384-5448 or cwoods@blm.gov. If a violation, such as riding off designated routes in the RMMA is observed, please contact the Ridgecrest Field Office at (760) 384-5400.

Bush-era Plan for Authorizing Off-road Vehicles on Federal Lands in Mojave Desert Found Illegal by Court

Contact: Lisa Belenky, Center for Biological Diversity, (415) 385-5694

Elden Hughes, Sierra Club, (562) 706-3017

Karen Schambach, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility

SAN FRANCISCO September 29, 2009- Late Monday a federal Judge rejected a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Plan for managing millions of acres of public land in the California desert. In response to a challenge brought by a coalition of conservation groups including the Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, and Desert Survivors, the court ruled that the Bush-era West Mojave Plan violated the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the National Environmental Policy Act by favoring off-road vehicle use over protection of sensitive desert resources such as endangered species and archeological sites.

This is a huge win for the California desert, " said Lisa Belenky, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. "The court's decision takes the Bureau of Land Management to task for designating thousands of miles of off-road vehicle routes while ignoring the significant damage these vehicles cause to our public lands and the wildlife that depend on these lands for their survival."

The court rejected the Bureau's use of a route designation "decision tree" that the agency used to designate areas for off-road vehicles - a system that failed to take into account such legal requirements as the minimization of routes to limit damage to public lands and disruption of wildlife and habitats. The court found that the Bureau failed to provide adequate explanation for many of the route changes and actually added routes beyond the limits expressly set in the agency's own planning documents.

It also found that the Bureau violated the law by failing to analyze alternatives that would reduce the number of miles of off-road vehicle routes so as to reduce impacts to resources; that the agency's analysis of impacts to off-road vehicles on air-quality, cultural resources, riparian resources, unusual plant assemblages, and sensitive species such as the Mojave fringe-toed lizard was inadequate; and that the Bureau failed to look at the impacts of cattle grazing on sensitive desert soils.

The West Mojave Plan, under development for more than a decade, was finalized in March 2006 (incorporating the 2003 route designation), and the lawsuit was filed in August 2006. While the court's decision concluded that the Bureau of Land Management violated the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, the court found that a review of the plan's impacts on the desert tortoise undertaken by a different federal agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, did comply with the Endangered Species Act.

The DTPC is Awarded \$89,000 in Grant Funding

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) is proud to announce the grant award of \$89,000 to finance two Operations and Maintenance projects at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTNA). Both of the projects will be implemented and completed in 2010.

The DTPC received \$21,000 to purchase signs. New signs will be installed to safely direct recreationists to the DTNA. Weathered, damaged, and vandalized signs posted along the boundary of the DTNA will be replaced and new signs will be installed in recently fenced locations. Additionally interpretive signs and educational panels will be developed and installed at the Interpretive Center of the DTNA.

An additional \$68,000 was awarded to the DTPC to fund the installation of three linear miles of desert tortoise exclusion fencing along the southern boundary of the DTNA. The current boundary is fenced, but allows tortoises to move freely into and out of the preserve. The southern boundary of the DTNA is bordered by roads that have experienced a tremendous increase in off-highway vehicle traffic in recent years. The installation of desert tortoise exclusion fencing at the nexus of the preserve boundary and roads. This will prevent tortoises from wandering into the increasingly busy roads and protect tortoises from potentially lethal encounters with vehicles.

Funding was awarded by the Grants and Cooperative Agreements Program, managed by the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Division of the California State Parks. The OHMVR provides for well managed off-highway vehicle recreation in the State of California by providing financial assistance to government agencies, schools, federally recognized Native American Tribes, and nonprofits. The DTPC will be applying for additional funding from this source annually.

Join us for the DTPC's 35th Annual Meeting and Banquet January 30th, 2010

The DTPC's 35th Annual Meeting and Banquet will be held at The Palmdale Hotel (300 W. Palmdale Blvd., Palmdale, CA 93551). The Annual Meeting is scheduled from 3:00-5:00 PM. After the meeting, from 5:00 to 6:00 PM there will time to mingle with old and new friends, enjoy the no-host bar and hors d'oeuvres, and place bids at the silent auction. The Annual Banquet officially begins at 6:00 PM with a dinner service, followed by a guest lecture.

The DTPC is currently accepting donations for the silent auction. If you are interested in making a donation to the auction or receiving more information about the event please contact Melissa Nicholson by calling (951) 683-3872 or by e-mail (dtpc@pacbell.net). For specific questions regarding reserving rooms for overnight accommodations, please contact Lisa Wilkerson of The Palmdale Hotel at (661) 273-1200.

Changes in Survey Guidelines Issued by the USFWS

As a reminder, survey protocols and guidelines issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have changed. The new guidelines for listed and endangered species in the Pacific Southwest Region can be found at http://www.fws.gov/ventura/speciesinfo/protocols_guidelines/.

Individuals conducting desert tortoise surveys should be aware of all changes made to survey guidelines. Documents pertinent to desert tortoise monitoring include: 2009 Pre-Project Field Survey Protocol for Potential Desert Tortoise Habitats, Authorized Biologist and Monitor Responsibilities and Qualifications, Desert Tortoise Authorized Biologist Request Form, Permit Statement Pertaining to High Temperatures for Handling Desert Tortoises, Transmitter Records Database, Transmitter Form Metadata, and Exclusion Fence Guidelines.

Mustard Removal at the DTNA

By Melissa Nicholson

Each spring the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) battles a serious invader at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTNA): *Hirschfeldia incana*, more commonly known as Mediterranean mustard.



Volunteer Tim Kirkpatrick removing mustard

Our attempts at the eradication of this invasive species, in addition to several others, began in 2006 and continues each spring due to the persistence of these invasive plants.

Eliminating these species from the DTNA is vital to the DTPC's mission. Non-native species compete with natives for limited resources. Additionally, desert tortoises have been scientifically proven to selectively forage on native, rather than non-native, plants. The removal of non-natives at the DTNA therefore protects the habitat of the desert tortoise.

A special thanks to all those who participated in mustard removal this year: Chuck Hemingway, Tim Kirkpatrick, Laura Stockton, and Bill Foos. Please contact Melissa Nicholson at (951) 683-3872 or dtpc@pacbell.net for more information on participating in future weed removal projects.

Special thanks to the following DTPC members for their contributions:

Mrs. Philippe Hammerness
Arizona Herpetological Society
Arthur Lillund
Anita Gryska
Gail S. Wilke
Linda Dyer

Special thanks to the following DTPC volunteers for their contributions:

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Tim Kirkpatrick
Laura Mogg
Markus Gaines
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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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Calendar of Events

November 10, 2009: Deadline for the California Desert Research Fund. This fund, sponsored by the Community Foundation, supports graduate student research that contributes to the understanding and conservation of desert parks, wildernesses, and other ecologically significant open spaces in the California Desert in San Bernardino, Riverside, Inyo, and Imperial Counties. Additional grant applications will be accepted in March 2010. For more information contact Celia Cudiamat at ccudiamat@thecomunityfoundation.net.

January 25, 2010: Deadline for submitting information and comments regarding the status review for the Sonoran population of the desert tortoise. A 90-day extension to the October 27, 2009 deadline has been granted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Please submit information via e-mail to SonoranDT@fws.gov.

January 30, 2010: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting and Banquet will be held at The Palmdale Hotel in Palmdale, California. For more information please call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail dtpc@pacbell.net.

February 26-28, 2010: The Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting of the Desert Tortoise Council will be held at the Doubletree Hotel in Ontario, California. For more information please visit www.deserttortoise.org.

July 7-12, 2010: A symposium "Head-Starting turtles-Learning from Experience" will be part of the joint meeting of Ichthyologists & Herpetologists held in Providence Rhode Island. Inquiries and abstracts should be sent to biorlb@hofstra.edu.



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Photo by Robert Villa



Please join us for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's 35th Annual Meeting and Banquet at The Palmdale Hotel on January 30, 2010. Please call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail dtpc@pacbell.net for more information.