

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Fall 2012 32:3



Recently released draft alternatives for the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) have raised strong concerns from environmental groups and the scientific community. The plan, covering approximately 22,587,000 acres in the Mojave and Colorado Deserts of California, may facilitate utility-scale renewable energy development in locations important for the conservation of desert tortoises, Mohave ground squirrels, and other species. Under certain alternatives, even the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA) is targeted for renewable energy development.

When California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed an Executive Order in November 2008 calling for all retail sellers of electricity to serve 33% of their load with renewable energy by 2020, he also initiated the creation of a plan to protect natural resources while streamlining the renewable energy permitting and compliance processes in the Mojave and Colorado Desert regions of California. Since 2008, California Energy Commission, California Department of Fish and Game, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been collaborating to develop the DRECP, with the ambitious goals of conserving and managing natural communities while facilitating the timely permitting of wind, solar, and geothermal energy projects in seven different counties. Planners outlined the benefits of this regional conservation plan, stating it would be guided by best available science, feedback from diverse stakeholders, and several conservation area design principles such as maximizing conservation area size, maintaining connectivity, buffering urban and rural impacts, and considering full ecological diversity and management needs within communities.

However, the draft alternatives for the DRECP released on July 25, 2012 left many environmental groups, researchers, and other stakeholders disappointed and deeply concerned. The Overview of DRECP Alternatives<sup>1</sup> presents five different scenarios for the designation of Development Focus Areas, where renewable energy development would be encouraged through streamlined permitting processes. The DTPC was shocked and dismayed to discover that two of the alternatives included Development Focus Areas comprising almost all of the DTRNA and many private conservation lands in the expansion

areas, as well as desert tortoise critical habitat in the adjacent Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley (see maps). Other alternatives included Development Focus Areas that closely approach or partially overlap DTRNA boundaries. Despite decades of collaboration by the Bureau of Land Management, California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the DTPC, and other groups to protect and manage the DTRNA, DRECP planners did not recognize the DTRNA as a legislatively and legally protected area to be excluded from development.



Land ownership in and around the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA)



Overlap of Development Focus Areas in DRECP Alternative 3 with the DTRNA and adjacent conservation lands. DRECP Alternative 5 also shows this degree of overlap with the DTRNA.

(Continued on page 3)

#### (Continued from page 2)

DTPC President, Mary Jane McEwan, submitted a letter of comment on the draft alternatives, outlining the long and rich history of protective designations, land acquisition, and management for the conservation of desert tortoises and other sensitive species at the DTRNA. We urged DRECP planners to exclude the DTRNA and other Research Natural Areas. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, critical habitat or lands acquired with public donations and mitigation funds for the protection of habitat for the desert tortoise, burrowing owl, Mohave ground squirrel and other sensitive species from Development Focus Are-Other environmental non-profit organizations, as. such as the Center for Biological Diversity, the Wildlands Conservancy, and Western Watersheds also expressed concerns over Development Focus Areas that included important conservation areas for the desert tortoise and other species.

An Independent Science Panel composed of experts in desert ecology, conservation biology, renewable energy technology, ecological modeling, mapping, climate change, and other relevant fields, also evaluated the progress of the DRECP with severe criticism:

"...based on our review of DRECP documents drafted to date, [the Independent Science Panel] is deeply concerned with the scientific quality of DRECP products and processes we reviewed, a lack of adherence to recommendations from ISA 2010, and inadequate or incomplete answers by Plan participants to questions we raised about methods, documentation, and other Plan elements. The panel unanimously concluded that DRECP is unlikely to produce a scientifically defensible plan without making immediate and significant course corrections, including strengthening leadership of the scientific program, increasing transparency in decision-making and documentation, improving scientific and technical foundations and analyses, and improving integration and synthesis of all analytical processes and products."

- Draft Report of Independent Science Review for the California Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan<sup>2</sup>

Among its many recommendations, the Independent Science Panel urged DRECP planners to update their

databases and maps of private non-profit conservancy lands and to include these lands in the reserve design process, to ensure that mitigation lands continue to be managed for their agreed upon use, and to continue to conserve the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area. The DTPC supports these recommendations and applauds the Independent Science Panel for highlighting the importance of the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area, both for the protection of high quality desert tortoise habitat, and for research and adaptive management.

We hope that the DRECP will incorporate the recommendations of the Independent Science Panel and the comments of the DTPC and other concerned environmental organizations to create an improved, scientifically sound plan that will be of real benefit for desert conservation. In a recent letter received from the California Department of Fish and Game, Chief Deputy Director Kevin Hunting acknowledged the concerns expressed by the DTPC and informed us that the draft alternatives have already undergone revisions informed by our comments and the comments of others. He concluded by stating, "The Department will continue to promote the selection of a preferred alternative that avoids siting renewable energy development in designated Critical Habitat, ACECs, and existing mitigation lands, including those within and adjacent to the DTRNA." Concerned stakeholders and members of the public will have additional opportunities to comment on plan alternatives when the agencies release further documents for review. We encourage everyone to follow this process and to continue to advocate the siting of renewable energy projects on already disturbed lands along existing transmission corridors, rather than on sensitive lands important for conservation. Much is at stake.

DRECP planning documents, reviews, and public comments can be found at <u>www.drecp.org</u>.

<sup>1</sup>Overview of DRECP Alternatives Briefing Materials, DRECP Stakeholders Committee Meeting, July 25, 2012.

http://www.drecp.org/meetings/2012-07-25-26\_workshop/background/ Stakeholders\_Briefing\_Materials\_08-07-2012.pdf

<sup>2</sup>Draft Report of Independent Science Review for the California Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan. Prepared by the Independent Science Panel, September 2012.

http://www.drecp.org/documents/docs/independent\_science\_2012/2012 -09-10\_DRECP\_Independent\_Science\_Panel\_2012\_Draft\_Report.pdf

The DTPC would the following Dr. Kristin Berry Jane McEwan Mark Bratton Laura Stockton Steve and Marlene Ishii Chris Herbst Dave Zantiny Jun Lee Chuck Hemingway Billy Foster	d líke to thank g volunteers: Laura Mogg Charles Massieon Shelley Ellis Sid Silliman Bonny Ahern Craig Bansmer Will Leibscher Jim Piercy Ed Patrovsky Student Conservation Association	A Special Thank You Lannie Dean Webb, a longtime resident of Lancaster, Califor- nia, passed away in late 2010 Mr. Webb was an avid support- er of many conservation organi- zations, including the Sierra Club, Red Rock Canyon and Poppy Preserve interpretive as- sociations, and the Desert Tor- toise Preserve Committee. In planning his estate, Mr. Webb chose to continue supporting the DTPC and several other charita
Jeanne Murrin	Will Hagel	like to acknowledge the ver- generous contribution of ove \$15,000 dollars received from the Lannie Dean Webb Family Trust. The funds will be used to acquire and protect new land for the desert tortoise and to support educational programs. <i>Article by Mark Bratto</i>

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Invites You to Join Us At Our 38th Annual Banquet and General Meeting January 26, 2013 Details Coming Soon



**Preserve Manager & Conservation Coordinator** 

Mary Kotschwar Logan

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Founded 1974

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### **Common Lizards of the DTRNA**

Photos and article by Mark Bratton.

There are many different species of lizards in the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area. Some of the more common species include: western whiptail lizard (*Cnemidophorus tigris*), sideblotched lizard (*Uta stansburiana*), desert horned lizard (*Phrynosoma platyrhinos*), long-nosed leopard lizard (*Gambelia wislizenii*), and zebra-tailed lizard (*Callisaurus draconoides*). These lizards and others can be found throughout the Natural Area, but please remember it is a protected area for wildlife—do not handle these species or remove them from their homes!

### The Western Whiptail Lizard



This 2.5 to 4.5 inch (not including the tail) lizard is commonly found in creosote bush scrub. It can be identified by its black ripple pattern on a brown and gray background as well as its distinctive jerky movements. It prefers to stay near the bases of the shrubs and is only seen in the open while darting between shrubs. This species of lizard uses its speed to escape from predators. Its long tail breaks off readily as a defense against predators; releasing the tail usually gives the lizard a chance to escape with its life! After losing its tail it will regenerate a new one in several weeks. Western whiptails feed primarily on small insects, such as crickets, beetles, flies, moths and grasshoppers; they can also eat spiders and scorpions. Several species of whiptail are only female

and reproduce by parthenogenesis whereby a female lays unfertilized eggs that are all identical to the mother. Some of the predators to the whiptail lizards are roadrunners, snakes, and larger lizards like leopard lizards.

### The Zebra-Tailed Lizard

The zebra-tailed lizard is commonly found in rocky or sandy open areas. This species of lizard uses speed to escape from predators. Its black and white "zebra" markings on its tail and its unusual habit of running with its tail curled back over its body make it an easy lizard to identify. Zebra-tailed lizards are insectivores (feeding primarily on small insects, such as crickets, beetles, flies, moths and grasshoppers). They grow up to 4 inches in length (not including the tail). Zebra -tailed lizards are also preyed on by other carnivorous lizards such as leopard lizards, as well as snakes and avian predators like loggerhead shrikes. These lizards have been estimated running at over 15 miles per hour. The zebra-tailed lizard is often seen during the hottest part of the day when other lizards have sought shelter from the heat.



### The Long-Nosed Leopard Lizard

The leopard lizard is the T-Rex of lizards! This lizard eats insects like many other lizards but in addition will eat small rodents and lizards, including other leopard lizards and even their own offspring! The leopard lizard waits near the edges of bushes where its leopard-like pattern blends into the bush as it lies in wait to ambush its prey. Leopard lizards can range from 3.5 to 5.75 inches in length (without the tail). Do not attempt to capture this lizard (if you can even catch it!) These lizards are aggressive and can bite your hand or fingers. Leopard lizards are commonly found on dirt roads throughout the desert at the base of bushes. Look for the black, leopard-like spotting on this lizard. This lizard has an extremely long tail (usually twice its body length) and uses camouflage and speed to escape from predators.

### The Desert Horned Lizard



The desert horned lizard is another lizard commonly found throughout the desert. Also known as a "horny toad," this lizard uses camouflage to hide from predators. In addition, the "horns" along the base of the horned lizard's head are also used as a defense mechanism to deter other animals from eating it. As a last line of defense, the horned lizard can puff itself up like a balloon to look larger to predators and individuals of some species can also squirt blood from the corners of their eyes to try to scare off potential trouble! Horned liz-

ards have very short but broad tails and are generally only 2 to 3 inches in length (without the tail). Look for the horned lizard along dirt roads in the morning when they are "sunning" themselves. They can be found from below sea level to 6,000 feet in elevation. Horned lizards primarily feed on ants. In fact, ants comprise up to 90 percent of the diets of some species of horned lizard. A single horned lizard can eat over 200 ants in one day! They will, however, eat other slow moving insects. Horned lizards are easily caught because they freeze and rely on their camouflage as their first line of defense, but they do not make good pets due to their specialized diets of ants; they do poorly in captivity if not fed ants on a regular basis. Please do not collect these lizards. There are eight species of horn lizard found in the United States: Texas, coastal, regal, flat–tailed, greater short-horned, pygmy short-horned, round-tailed, Goode's, and desert.

### The Side-Blotched Lizard

The side-blotched lizard is another common lizard found almost everywhere in the desert. These lizards can range from 1.5 to 2.25 inches in length and are insectivores. This species of lizard uses speed to escape from its many predators; they are heavily preyed upon by other lizards, snakes, birds, and even mammals. To compensate for this, it has a high reproductive rate; females can produce 2 to 56 eggs per year! Look for the blue "blotching" on this lizard to identify it. Due to its small size, this lizard can warm up more quickly than some of the larger lizards, and as a result can be seen on warm winter days when other lizards are not active.





### The Desert Spiny Lizard

The desert spiny lizard is a heavy-bodied lizard that measures 3.25 to 5.5 inches in length (without the tail). As the name implies, this lizard has very spiny scales on its body. These scales are so rough that you can sometimes hear the lizard moving against rocks or the wood of a shrub or tree branch. Because the black, wedge-shaped markings on the desert spiny lizards' necks look somewhat like a collar, people often misidentify them as collared lizards. To tell these species apart, look for the spiny scales and

single black "collar" on the spiny lizard and smooth scales and a double "collar" on the desert collared lizard. The spiny lizard mainly eats small insects and other small lizards, and will occasionally eat plant material. Males will often bob their head and do "push ups" with their front legs. During the breeding season, males can have blue spotting on their bellies and metallic black and yellow streaking along their sides. The desert spiny lizard is usually found around rock outcrops and in and around piles of wood like wood rat nests; they may also live in Joshua trees. These lizards hide in the rock crevices and woody debris to avoid predators.

### The Desert Collared Lizard

The desert collared lizard has a broad head, short snout, long tail, and measures 2.75 to 4.5 inches in length (without the tail). It can range in color from tan to olive. This lizard is sometimes confused with the desert spiny lizard. To tell the difference between them, look for two distinct black rings around the neck region of the desert collared lizard (the desert spiny lizard has only one). It also does not have the spiny scales like the desert spiny lizard. The desert collared lizard mainly eats insects, but small lizards, berries, and other plant material are also in their diet. This lizard is often found in rocky areas, arroyos, gullies, and hill slopes and likes to hide in rock crevices to avoid predators.



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More information for each event can be found by calling (951) 683-3872 or sending an email to dtpc@pacbell.net. Additional information can be found on the DTPC's website <u>www.tortoise-tracks.org</u> and Facebook <u>www.facebook.com/dtpc.inc</u>.



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## **Calling All Volunteers!**

Looking to get involved? We have diverse volunteer opportunities in several locations:

→ <u>STEWARDSHIP</u>

Sign installation, parcel monitoring, and invasive plant species management. (Kern, San Bernardino, and Riverside Counties)

→ <u>EDUCATION</u>

Presentations to school and community groups, representing the DTPC at outreach events, creation and distribution of materials. (throughout Southern California)

 $\rightarrow$  <u>RESEARCH</u>

Wildlife photo classification and data entry. (DTRNA, DTPC Office in Riverside, CA)

→ <u>OFFICE SUPPORT</u>

Preparation of mailings, merchandise orders, and office organization (Riverside, CA)

If you would like more information about one of the listed opportunities or have other project ideas, please contact Mary Kotschwar Logan at (951) 683-3872 or <u>dtpc@pacbell.net</u>.