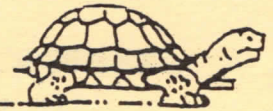


TORTOISE TRACKS



THE DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER
P.O. Box 453, Ridgecrest, CA 93555

SUMMER, 1989
Volume 10, No. 2

GOOD NEWS!

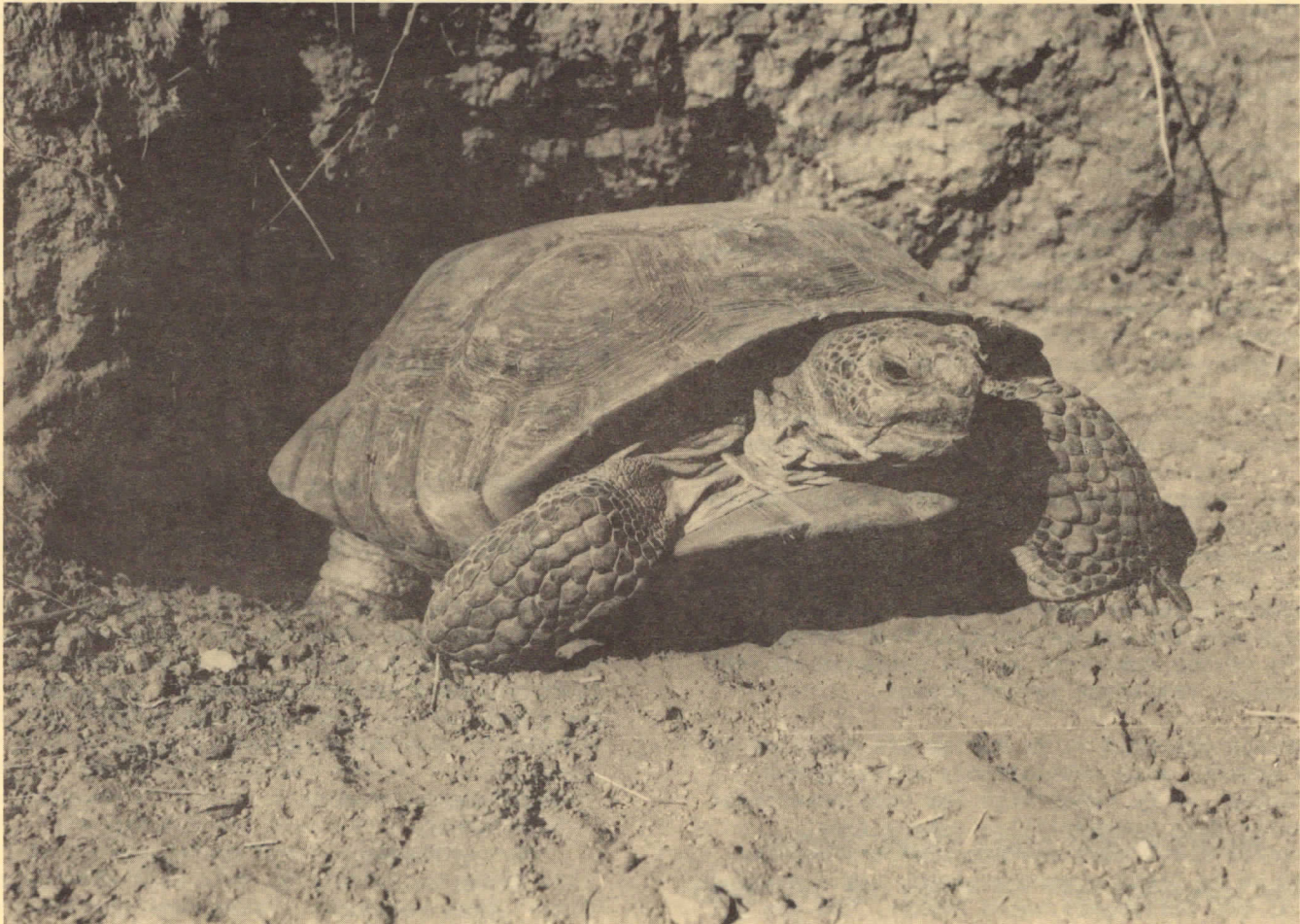


PHOTO by BEV STEVESON

TWO VERY IMPORTANT STEPS HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO HELP THE TORTOISE:

June 22, 1989 State listing of tortoise as threatened.
See article, Page No. 2.

July 24, 1989 Emergency listing of Mojave desert tortoise population as "Endangered" by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Emergency protection of the Mojave desert tortoise population (or all wild tortoises north and west of the Colorado River) will take effect immediately upon publication of a notice in the Federal Register and will extend for 240 days, during which time the Fish and Wildlife Service will proceed with a formal listing process for the species. This action is in response to a request for emergency listing by the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Defenders of Wildlife. A public comment period will take place during the formal listing process. The Service also proposes that immediate discussions begin on development of a recovery implementation plan which would address both the short-term crisis and long-term viability of desert tortoise populations.

COMMISSION LISTS TORTOISE AS THREATENED

In a dramatic finish to the drawn out struggle to list the desert tortoise as threatened in California, the California Fish and Game Commission voted 3-2 in favor of listing at its meeting in Lone Pine on June 22. State listing of the tortoise does not provide the protection available under federal listing laws, but will increase state funds for its protection and recovery, expands its protection under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and requires state-funded projects in the desert to take measures to shield the species from harm.

Despite a prohibition against further public testimony on the issue, Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee members, supporters from the Southwestern Herpetologists Society, and others attending, made their feelings known by holding up brightly-colored signs saying "List the Tortoise" and "Save the Tortoise." The signs were provided by Committee Trustee Tom Dodson. Opposition to the listing was nearly invisible.

Over thirty supporters made the long trip to Lone Pine, on a meeting date perfectly timed to coincide with the last day of school in many areas, and other conflicting events. The respectful, silent show of support for the desert tortoise may have helped tip the balance as the voting came down to the decision of Commission President Robert Bryant.

Bryant appeared to be making his decision at that moment, with considerable wavering and agonizing, as he asked Fish and Game Department Director Pete Bontadelli to make a final statement about what the Department's actions would be if listing were granted. At one point one of his colleagues asked Bryant, "Do you get the feeling you are being watched?" After perhaps two minutes of hesitation, Bryant cast an almost inaudible vote of "Yes," and the audience broke into loud applause. The petition to list the desert tortoise as threatened, submitted by Dr. Glenn Stewart on July 13, 1987, was now law, after nearly a year delay.

While this modest action does not adequately respond to the grave and worsening condition of desert tortoise populations, it is a significant and necessary first step in official recognition of the problem. At this writing, there is hope that emergency action will be taken at the federal level to list the tortoise as endangered, as requested in a May 31 petition to Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan, submitted by a coalition of national environmental groups. The petition cites the decimation of tortoise populations by the recent outbreak of disease in its call for emergency listing. Senator Pete Wilson as strongly endorsed the petition in a letter to Secretary Lujan.

The Committee's Lifeline Fund has acted to support this petition by seeking further endorsements from other members of Congress. We are also approaching experts on the disease problem and other threats to the tortoise for their help in the event further steps need to be taken to secure federal endangered listing for the tortoise.

Congratulations and thanks are due to all the many groups and individuals who have written letters, attended meetings, conducted research, and organized support for the state listing effort. The June 22 victory offers hope that further progress can be made to achieve strong protection and recovery actions for the tortoise and its habitat.

Curtis Horton, Director
The Desert Tortoise Preserve
Committee's Lifeline Fund

Please see update on federal listing on Page 1.

SPRING WORK PARTY REPORT

At a spring work party held April 2, 1989 at the Natural Area, nine participants continued the removal of Russian thistle and sand from the north and west fence boundaries. Coordinator Bev Steveson was very appreciative of the efforts of the following volunteers:

Jayne Chavez-Scales
Don Dollar
Warren Forgey
Vendy Hall
Jerry Martin
Mary Shepherd
Mike Shepherd
Laura Stockton

FALL WORK PARTY PLANNED

Please plan to join us Saturday and Sunday, October 7th and 8th, to work at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. We will meet at the northeast corner of California City Blvd. and Neuralia at 9:00 a.m. Bring heavy rakes, hoes, shovels, pliers, and gloves; food and lots of water; and be prepared to spend most of the day in any kind of weather. If you can't participate both days, perhaps you can join us for one.

If possible, please inform Bev Steveson (805) 832-9121, 418 Brookhaven Drive, Bakersfield CA 93304 of your participation.

HELP NEEDED

Robin and Jan Kittredge have found it necessary to relinquish their responsibilities handling the Committee's fundraising products. The Board of Trustees appreciates their enthusiasm and effort since taking over the job about a year ago. The Committee is now searching for a person or persons to serve as Products Chair.

Duties include: Stocking, storing and mailing Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee products.

Time required: Averages about one hour per week per year.

Storage: Currently about four dozen 12" x 12" x 18" boxes.

This work offers an excellent opportunity to become actively involved. To express interest or for further information, please call Carol Panlaqui (619) 327-7785.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

SACRAMENTO TURTLE and TORTOISE CLUB

The Sacramento Turtle and Tortoise Club serves a very real need in the Sacramento, California area. It offers care information, adoption services, an informative newsletter, and an opportunity for folks to gather to share their interest in turtles and tortoises at its meetings, which are held three times a year. Though nominally a branch of T.E.A.M. (Turtle & Tortoise Education Adoption Media, Los Angeles), the Sacramento club is a separately functioning unit. Its founder and president, Felice Rood, is a dedicated dynamo who spends much of her time coordinating club activities, putting out its quarterly newsletter, answering many "turtle calls" each day, and generally doing all that she can to aid our chelonian friends.

The club's membership fee is just \$2.00 per year, largely due to careful planning of its newsletter -- two sides of an 8-1/2 by 14 sheet packed with considerable information on chelonian health, conservation, care, and club plans and activities. Felice also recommends joining T.E.A.M. for its more extended coverage of turtle and tortoise welfare.

Felice Rood may be contacted at:
25 Starlit Circle
Sacramento, CA 95831
(916) 421-1134

Felice and members of the Sacramento Turtle and Tortoise Club have been strong supporters of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee.

THANK YOU . . .
KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK FOR THE TORTOISE!

NEW BIOLOGIST ADDED TO BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT'S TORTOISE TEAM

In March, Ted Rado joined the staff at the Bureau of Land Management's Desert District Office in Riverside, where he will assist Dr. Kristin Berry with the desert tortoise program. Ted has an outstanding background in herpetology, endangered species, and in desert wildlife issues. Ted first worked for the Bureau in the late 1970's as part of the Desert Plan Program and then transferred to the California State Office, where he focused on endangered species. His next position was in the Bureau's Barstow Office, where he prepared many plans for areas of critical environmental concern and spent leisure time riding the roads at night to look for snakes. Prior to joining the tortoise team in the Desert District, Ted worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Sacramento, where he earned a reputation negotiating mitigation and compensation agreements with developers to protect endangered species in the San Joaquin Valley. Ted has spent most of his time since arriving at Riverside with the raven pilot program. Welcome back to the desert, Ted! We are delighted to have you.

RIDGECREST AREA VOLUNTEERS GIVE VALUED HELP AT THE NATURAL AREA

The Board of Trustees recently learned of a number of residents of the Ridgcrest area who have been doing volunteer work at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. The activities have been organized by Bob Parker and Debby Percy of the Bureau of Land Management Ridgcrest Resource Area office.

We hope to meet these volunteers at the Fall Work Party, but in the meantime, a hearty THANK YOU! to these special people:

Camille Alden
Ed Alden
Julian Almaraz
Phyllis Almaraz
Cheryl Bruce
Lisa McCain
Gail Pollard
Joe Rice
Mark Russell
Cliff Sime

EXPERTS ON REPTILIAN DISEASES MEET AT DESERT TORTOISE NATURAL AREA TO BEGIN RESEARCH ON RESPIRATORY DISEASE, SYNDROME



PHOTO by BEV STEVESON

Dr. Kristin Berry, Steve Boland, Dr. Jack Gaskin, and Dr. Elliott Jacobson confer at interpretive center

On May 4, Dr. Kristin Berry of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) hosted a meeting of scientists, veterinarians, research pathologists, and field biologists at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. The purpose was to discuss the outbreak of the upper respiratory disease in wild tortoises and to develop a plan of action to combat the disease. Dr. Elliott Jacobson and Dr. Jack Gaskin, internationally recognized experts on reptilian diseases from the University of Florida, participated and examined several ill tortoises. Dr. Jacobson and Dr. Gaskin have a contract with funding from the Bureau of Land Management and California Department of Fish and Game, and have started the process of identifying the organism causing the disease. Dr. David Hunter, a veterinarian from the California Department of Fish and Game's Wildlife Investigations Lab, joined the group. Dr. Hunter is pursuing treatment of a small sample of tortoises in the Fish and Game laboratory in northern California.

Topics of discussion included typical symptoms of the respiratory disease, frequency of tortoises showing disease symptoms, mortality rates, the extent of disease in the western Mojave Desert and elsewhere, and techniques for reducing the impact of the disease to tortoises. Contributing to the discussions was Dr. Craig Knowles of FaunaWest Wildlife Consultants, who was supervising the surveying of parts of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, Rand Mountains, and Fremont Valley for the BLM. Peter Woodman, who is working on the Honda property near Cantil, described his feelings, as did UCLA graduate student Chuck Peterson, who is working on the Natural Area. Tim Shields, Gilbert Goodlett, and Steve Boland--a team of biologists conducting a BLM sponsored survey of a permanent desert tortoise study plot at the Natural Area--outlined disease symptoms and occurrence in tortoises in the vicinity of the interpretive center. BLM biologist Bob Parker and Ranger Don Dollar also added observations. Bev Steveson of

the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee was present to record the meeting on camera.

Overall the findings from the spring surveys for ill tortoises are depressing. The disease appears to have been introduced to wild populations through release of sick captive tortoises in the past few years. In fact, owners of captives are continuing to return their animals to the desert! Jeff Howland, the Naturalist at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, discovered two recently abandoned captives with obvious symptoms of the respiratory syndrome.

Dr. Knowles and his field team walked about 600 survey miles, primarily at the Natural Area, and encountered 468 live tortoises. Forty-three percent of the live tortoises showed signs of the disease. Tortoises with symptoms have been observed in an area encompassing approximately 400 square miles between California City, Cantil, Fremont Valley, and Kramer Junction. Evidence of the disease was not evenly distributed throughout the populations. Significantly more males than females showed symptoms, and almost twice as many adults were affected as juveniles and immatures. Mortality rates are high, with losses from one site within the Natural Area estimated at about 30% since last year.

Readers of *Tortoise Tracks* will be heartened to know that many dedicated biologists and scientists are actively pursuing research on the respiratory disease and the general well-being of desert tortoises. For example, Dr. Jacobson and Dr. Gaskin are pursuing several lines of inquiry with microbiologists, research pathologists, and specialists in wildlife diseases throughout the country.

Adequate funding is critical. Funds are needed for research to explore several topics, such as:

- identifying the organism causing the disease; is the disease caused by a virus, bacteria or other pathogen?
- how is the disease transmitted--by air, contact, or in burrows?
- can ill and healthy tortoises be distinguished early in the course of the disease through blood and other simple tests?
- can the disease be successfully treated using a combination of new and old drugs?

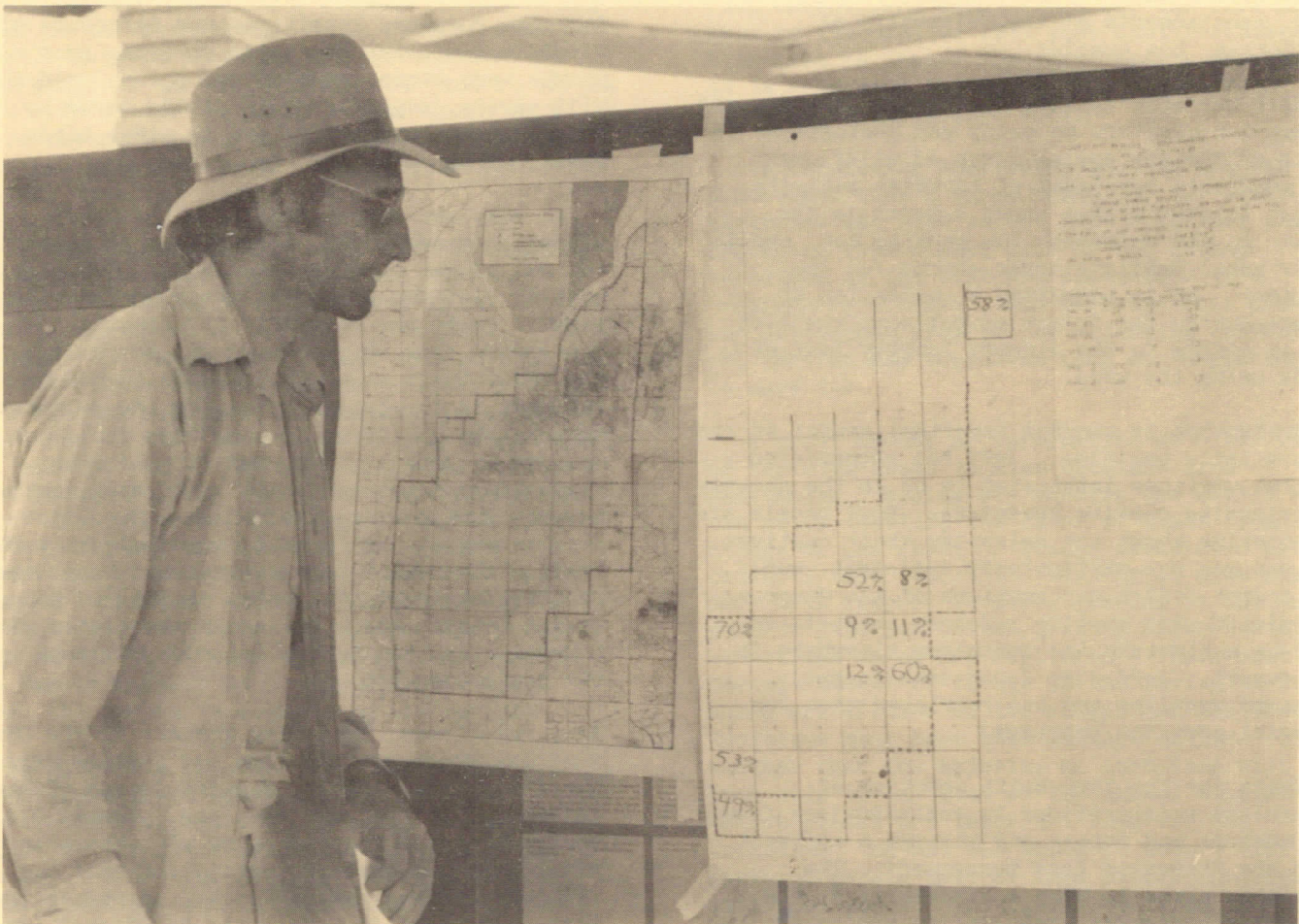


PHOTO by BEV STEVESON

Dr. Craig Knowles, of FaunaWest Wildlife Consultants, studies data posted on map of Natural Area

Experts on Reptilian Diseases, cont.

- and can the disease be contained by fencing or other techniques?

Pet owners also must be educated to prevent future unauthorized releases of captive tortoises.

Members of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's Board of Trustees are meeting with government officials and will be identifying ways Committee members can assist. Please look for a special section in the Fall issue of the Tortoise Tracks.

NATURALIST JEFF HOWLAND CONTRIBUTES TO ENJOYMENT OF NATURAL AREA VISITORS

Naturalist Jeff Howland has been on duty five days a week, including weekends and holidays since March 15. If comments in the visitor register at the interpretive center are used as a measure of success, Jeff has made significant contributions to the enjoyment of several hundred people coming to the Natural Area this spring! His duties as a Naturalist ended in mid-July, at which time he resumed writing a dissertation on the desert iguana to complete Ph.D. requirements at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Jeff was able to find tortoises, lizards, and snakes for visitors to enjoy and photograph, in spite of the dry spring, lack of wildflowers, and generally low-level of tortoise activity. He has located snakes under a bench in the kiosk, in the outhouse, the parking lot, and in their usual habitats under shrubs for the visitors. He is compiling a collection of invertebrates for future educational exhibits and is adding to the already lengthy list of birds using the area.

Protection is another important aspect of the Naturalist's position. Jeff has encountered several visitors interested in or in the process of releasing captive tortoises. Most people are cooperative about not releasing their captives, but one man was particularly insistent, would not accept Jeff's explanations of the dangers associated with captive releases, and stated that he would take the tortoises elsewhere in the desert. Jeff also found some recently released captives and has retrieved them for official adoption programs.

Funds for the four-month position of Naturalist were provided by contributions from our members and donors and through a contract with the Bureau of Land Management. The Committee plans to have a Naturalist at the interpretive center again in the spring of 1990! Again, we thank the membership and the donors for their support of this much-needed program.

HUMANE SOCIETY

LIMITS RAVEN REDUCTION PROGRAM

The Bureau of Land Management, in cooperation with the Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game, initiated a pilot program designed to reduce losses of juvenile tortoises to raven predation in parts of the Mojave and Colorado deserts. The program began in April, after the Bureau received a permit from the Fish and Wildlife Service to kill up to 1500 ravens.

Ravens are a major predator on juvenile tortoises. Breeding bird surveys conducted annually by the Fish and Wildlife Service since 1968 have revealed that ravens have increased 15-fold in the Mojave and 5-fold in the Colorado deserts in the last 20 years. Data Collected at 16 tortoise study plots in California indicate that up to 80% of juveniles found dead have been killed by ravens!

The government agencies completed an Environmental Assessment for the pilot program in January and then mailed copies of the draft to over 500 agencies, groups, and individuals for review. Approximately 90 letters of comments were received. While conservation groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, Desert Protective Council, Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, and Defenders of Wildlife supported the pilot program, many people were concerned that the poison used to kill ravens, might be accidentally eaten by other animals and cause harm to other birds, kit foxes, or coyotes.

In response to concerns from the public, the Bureau took additional precautions to protect the non target species, including: (1) placing bait on elevated platforms where terrestrial animals could not reach it; (2) placing unpoisoned eggs on platforms and observing whether animals other than ravens showed an interest in the bait; (3) wiring the poisoned eggs to the platforms so that they could not be dropped or carried away; and (4) continual monitoring of poisoned bait to prevent nontarget animals from getting the poison. The pilot project was also refocused to include only three areas: the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, the landfill at Twentynine Palms Marine Air Ground Combat Center, and a few nests associated with transmission line towers and rock outcrops in the eastern deserts.

Many volunteers, including members of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee and Southwestern Herpetologists Society, donated dozens of hours to monitoring the bait stations. Thanks are due to these people for assisting with the program! After days and weeks of monitoring bait stations, Animal Damage Control personnel, armed with experience in protecting California Least Tern nest sites from raven attacks, began to place poisoned hard-boiled eggs at bait stations. The first site was the landfill at

Twentynine Palms, where raven numbers were reduced from a peak of 130 birds to approximately 20 birds in four days. Ninety-eight dead ravens were collected and will be sent to museums for permanent storage as specimens and mounts.

Of interest to our members and readers, the Bureau reports that only ravens showed an interest in the unpoisoned and poisoned eggs! At no time did other animals attempt to reach the bait. This is a very important point, because of the concerns about the potential for secondary poisoning.

In the meantime, John Grandy, Vice President for the Humane Society of the United States, threatened to file a lawsuit to stop the pilot program. Although Dr. Grandy was asked by the Bureau to provide advice for the pilot program in October of 1988, he did not respond and did not make any written comments on the Environmental Assessment during the public review period in January and February. Instead, he waited until two months after the commenting period had ended, and wrote a letter of protest in April!

A day after the first poisoned eggs were placed at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, the Humane Society obtained a temporary restraining order in the Washington, D. C. Federal District Court. Only 12 poisoned eggs were placed at bait stations at the Natural Area, and 10 of the eggs were eaten. Probably a half dozen to a dozen ravens using a small part of the Natural Area may have died before the program was halted.

In late June, the Bureau of Land Management and Humane Society reached an out-of-court agreement allowing the pilot program to continue, subject to severe limitations. Between late June and December, when the permit to kill ravens expires, the Bureau may kill no more than 16 ravens at the Natural Area, must first try to kill the ravens by shooting, may not prebait with unpoisoned eggs, and only as a last resort may use a maximum of 10 poisoned eggs. The agreement also stipulates that the Bureau will not conduct any additional raven reductions at Twentynine Palms and will be limited to killing no more than 36 ravens in the eastern deserts. Prior to placing any poisoned eggs at bait stations, the Bureau must invite the Humane Society to be present. At press time, the Bureau is evaluating its options.

We have been informed that the Bureau will be preparing a draft raven management plan associated environmental document, as well as a report on the pilot program conducted in April and May. The pilot program, while severely constrained by negotiations with the Humane Society, demonstrated that ravens will readily locate and consume poisoned eggs on elevated platforms. Preliminary monitoring, undertaken

by dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers, clearly showed that risk to other animals is minimal.

The Board of Trustees of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee continues to support the program and looks forward to the time when raven predation pressures can be reduced to more normal levels and survival rates of juvenile tortoises can be assured.



FROM THE BLM CORNER

For the last ten years, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has been monitoring the desert tortoise through study plots in the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA), and other areas in the Mojave desert, to learn what impacts man and natural phenomena have had on their populations.

Through scientific analysis, the BLM has learned both interesting and alarming things. It was surprising to see a severe decline in the tortoise population in the western Mojave desert, up to 60 percent in some areas. From the study plots done in the DTNA, it was learned that ravens were responsible for the loss of most of the smaller (2-7 year old) tortoises. This area is fenced from motorcycles and sheep, so in this case the culprit was identified through some detective work.

In conducting monitoring in 1989 the BLM discovered that a large number of the adult tortoises had died at the DTNA. Further studies indicated that almost half of the living tortoises at the DTNA are infected with a respiratory disease. BLM believes this disease was introduced from people releasing diseased pet turtles and tortoises they no longer wanted to care for.

A great amount of information on other causes of tortoise death is also obtained from monitoring. Biologists analyze the shells and can often identify the cause of death from such things as gun shots or cracks associated with crushing from vehicles. Monitoring also plays a part with respect to sheep grazing in the Mojave desert. The BLM allows grazing under certain conditions which are monitored. There must be a certain amount of forage in the spring before sheep are allowed on the range, and the desert tortoises must have been out and active. This ensures that the majority of tortoises will have been able to eat some of the annual vegetation. Native plants are important food for the tortoises, and BLM wants to ensure that the tortoise gets a shot at them before the sheep enter the range. Tortoises also like the dried plants in the fall, so other restrictions are placed on sheep grazing to ensure there will be something to eat at that time as well.

From the BLM Corner, cont.

A good deal of monitoring has accompanied the raven control project undertaken this year in the California desert. At the DTNA, raven occurrence was identified and along with previous information from the studies, the offending birds were identified. At the DTNA less than 10 ravens were observed before control, and none were seen in the two weeks following. In a drive around the entire DTNA, only one raven was seen by observers. As indicated elsewhere in this newsletter, the raven control project was halted. A meeting with the agencies involved with the project will be held in the near future to determine what the next step will be.

Bob Parker, Wildlife Biologist
Bureau of Land Management
Ridgecrest Resource Area

ATTENTION: MEMBERS and DONORS

Please check the mailing label on this newsletter. If "86" appears in the upper right corner, it means that we have not heard from you since 1986. We plan to update our mailing list October 1st, at which time names with an "86" designation will be moved to our inactive list. Please let us hear from you soon . . . Keep Tortoise Tracks coming your way!

**ARMY PROPOSES TO EXPAND
FT. IRWIN NATIONAL TRAINING CENTER
INTO PRIME TORTOISE HABITAT**

The U. S. Army and the Bureau of Land Management are preparing a joint Environmental Impact Statement for the expansion of Ft. Irwin National Training Center north of Barstow, California. The area proposed for expansion encompasses approximately 200 square miles of choice tortoise habitat in the western Mojave Desert and supports densities of up to or exceeding 250 tortoises per square mile. If the expansion is approved, lands now under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management will become Department of Defense properties. Tortoise habitat will be training grounds for tank maneuvers and other military activities. The resident tortoise population and habitat will be destroyed. Ironically, there is no evidence of the upper respiratory disease in tortoises living in this part of the desert and much of the habitat is relatively undisturbed.

The Environmental Impact Statement will be available for public review in August. Copies can be obtained by writing or calling:

Bureau of Land Management
ATTN: Ft. Irwin EIS
150 Coolwater Lane
Barstow, California 92311
(619) 256-3595

TORTOISE TRACKS is published quarterly by the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.
Jean Jones, Editor

DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE, INC.
P.O. Box 453, Ridgecrest, CA 93555

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