

Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Newsletter

Spring 1992

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Steve Ogg (second from left) tours Desert Tortoise Natural area with Committee members. Ogg and Rande Gallant are serving as this spring's naturalists at the DTNA. See story page 7. Photo by Bev Steveson

UNLAWFUL OHV USE IMPACTS TORTOISE HABITAT

A report prepared by EnviroPlus Consulting for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee documents that unauthorized Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) activity continues to have significant impact on critical habitat for the threatened desert tortoise. The report is based on field surveys conducted in parts of the Rand Mountains and Fremont Valley on November 26, 27, 30 and December 3, 1991, and was a follow up to a similar study conducted by EnviroPlus in late 1990.

During the latest study period, the surveyors recorded several ways in which OHV use has

impacted tortoise habitat: They counted the number of times unauthorized tracks intersected an open route approved for OHV activity; they tallied other unauthorized tracks occurring in zones further and further away from the open track; they raked portions of closed trails and returned after a week to count any new tracks that had been made; and lastly, they created concealed observation stations to observe actual OHV use.

As a result of these methods of observation the report concluded that unauthorized OHV use is high in these restricted areas--as high as an

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average of thirty-eight unauthorized tracks per linear mile based on the number of unauthorized tracks intersecting an approved, open route.

The study of zones, or transects, beside these open routes yielded an even more accurate estimate. According to this method, which studied 39 transects, unauthorized tracks were found on the average of one for every thirty-one linear feet. The incidence was noted to decrease with distance from the open trail, but the occurrence of these tracks is still frequent enough to cause alarm. When these data are looked at together they suggest a great, negative impact on the desert tortoise habitat.

In June of 1989 the desert tortoise was listed by the State of California as a threatened species. Shortly after, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the species as endangered. This was followed in April of 1990 with a permanent listing of threatened. OHV activity contributes significantly to the total damage to desert tortoise habitat.

After receiving its listing as threatened, the desert tortoise received additional protection from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which placed a portion of its habitat under temporary emergency quarantine. This quarantine and road closure included the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) and Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and the West Rand Mountains ACEC.

Nearly all human activities were excluded from the DTNA and West Rand Mountains ACEC during the quarantine. When the quarantine was lifted on November 21, 1990 the BLM reopened approximately 150 miles of road. This amounted to a 75% reduction in previously existing routes.

The original (1990) EnviroPlus study was commissioned by the committee due to our concern about the level of OHV activity resulting from the lifting of the quarantine. Both the 1990 and 1991 studies suggest that the BLM's instruction governing OHV activities are not being followed by many OHV enthusiasts. As a result, significant degradation of tortoise habitat is occurring.

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Tortoise Tracks

Tortoise Tracks is the quarterly Newsletter of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection and preservation of the desert tortoise.

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YOUR LETTERS REQUESTED TO HELP ACHIEVE CONTINUED CONGRESSIONAL FUNDING FOR DESERT TORTOISE HABITAT ACQUISITIONS

Thanks to continued funding support from Congress, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has made significant progress in acquiring critical desert tortoise habitat from willing sellers. Last year, Congress appropriated \$700,000 for these acquisitions, for a total of \$6 million since the acquisition campaign began. For the upcoming year (FY 1993), the Bush Administration budget requests \$700,000 for acquisition of 2,630 acres of tortoise habitat in Kern, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties. Although conservationists support this request, additional funding is necessary. The "Conservation Alternative" requests a total of \$1.9 million for habitat acquisitions in three tortoise-related categories (\$200,000 for the Desert Tortoise Natural Area; \$500,000 for the Chuckwalla Bench ACEC; and \$1.2 million for other high population density tortoise habitat).

How You Can Help

Continued Congressional funding for the BLM's desert tortoise habitat acquisition program depends critically on the urging of conservationists. You can voice your support by sending letters to some or all of the key public officials listed below. Please thank them for their ongoing support of the BLM's desert tortoise habitat acquisitions with Interior Appropriations from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Remind them that these acquisitions are conducted on a willing-seller basis; enhance coordinated BLM management; improve protection for the highest-density desert tortoise populations; and reduce the potential for future land use conflicts. Also remind them that the desert tortoise is listed as a threatened species by both federal and state law.

Thank you for your support!

(Editor's note: this request for letters was adapted from an Action Alert distributed by the Defenders of Wildlife. For further information about the status of FY 1993 appropriations for desert tortoise habitat acquisitions, you may contact Defenders of Wildlife's California Office at (916) 442-6386 or write to 1228 N Street, Suite 6, Sacramento, CA 95814.)

PLEASE SEND LETTERS SUPPORTING DESERT TORTOISE HABITAT ACQUISITION FUNDING TO THE FOLLOWING:

The Honorable Sidney R. Yates, Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior
House Committee on Appropriations
B-308 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6023

The Honorable Bill Lowery
2433 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0541
(The only California Congressional Representative
on the House Interior Appropriations Subcommit-
tee)

The Honorable Jerry Lewis
2312 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0535

The Honorable William M. Thomas
2402 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0520

The Honorable George E. Brown, Jr.
2300 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0536

The Honorable Alfred A. McCandless
2422 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0537

The Honorable Mel Levine
2443 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0527

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Senator Alan Cranston
112 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-0503

Senator John Seymour
367 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-0503

Senator Robert C. Byrd, Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior
Senate Committee on Appropriations
127 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6033

The Honorable Manuel Lujan, Jr.
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20240

GAO REPORT CRITICAL OF BLM'S DESERT GRAZING PROGRAM

The degradation of desert tortoise habitat caused by livestock grazing on public lands has been a long-standing concern of tortoise conservationists. A recent report by the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) highlights the environmental and fiscal costs associated with the Bureau of Land Management's Hot Desert Grazing Program. Excerpts summarizing the major findings of the November 1991 GAO report are reprinted below.

Purpose

The effect of domestic livestock grazing on public lands is controversial. Historically, public lands were damaged through overgrazing, and some believe that this damage is continuing. Conversely, the livestock industry believes that the public lands are in better condition now than they have been in the past 100 years. This debate is particularly important in the nation's

so-called hot deserts—the Mojave, the Sonoran, and the Chihuahuan—because of the fragile nature of the hot desert ecosystems and the long-term nature of recovery for most areas once damage occurs.

Concerned about this issue, the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands, House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, requested that GAO review the federal grazing program in the hot deserts as administered by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). GAO examined (1) the environmental and budgetary costs associated with livestock grazing in desert areas, (2) the benefits resulting from this activity, and (3) BLM's management of livestock grazing in the hot deserts.

Background

Almost 20 million acres of BLM land located in Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah are situated within the boundaries of America's hot deserts. Within these deserts, about 1,000 livestock operations hold permits allowing them to graze livestock on approximately 1,050 parcels of land (referred to as allotments). Permits are issued for up to 10 years and specify the maximum amount of forage, measured in animal unit months (AUMs), that is attached to each allotment. An AUM is defined as the amount of forage needed to sustain one cow, one horse, or five sheep for 1 month. From March 1991 to February 1992, BLM is charging operators \$1.97 per AUM.

Many acres of desert lands were damaged in the late 1800s by overgrazing, and concern over the health of these lands continues today. BLM is responsible for managing, maintaining, and improving the public lands and for ensuring that overgrazing does not recur. BLM's policy is to determine the proper grazing level by monitoring the impact of the current number of livestock on BLM's allotments and to adjust levels accordingly.

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EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH PROGRAM

By Jun Lee

The Preserve Committee anticipates educating about 5,000 school-aged children in the San Bernardino Unified School District about the threatened status of the desert tortoise and positive ways they can help preserve the species.

Supported by a grant from the Bureau of Land Management and privately-donated funds, the Preserve Committee is implementing a pilot Educational Outreach Program for elementary school children in San Bernardino and for the general public through conservation fairs in southern California.

The primary goal of the program is to provide participants an opportunity to examine the causes and consequences of desert tortoise habitat degradation and population declines. Human impacts, both positive and negative, to the long-term viability of desert tortoise populations will be highlighted.

Through this pilot educational program the Preserve Committee will attempt to create a positive understanding of the desert tortoise and the desert environment. Specifically, we expect to:

1. Increase public awareness of the threatened status of the desert tortoise;
2. Inform participants about the major factors contributing to the decline in desert tortoise populations;
3. Encourage participants to actively support efforts to lessen or eliminate negative impacts to desert tortoise populations and habitat;
4. Promote understanding of the importance of the desert tortoise to the desert ecosystem and

foster awareness of the desert tortoise's role as an "indicator species";

5. Illustrate that conservation efforts focused on the desert tortoise also serve to protect the habitat and existence of many other plant and animal species.

The Preserve Committee program which commenced in October 1991 and which is expected to conclude at the end of September 1992, may be continued and expanded as an annual effort throughout the southern California area.

Mr. Eddie Trevino, a graduate student in the biology department at California State University, Dominguez Hills, has been selected as the primary person responsible for the program's implementation. A resident of San Pedro, Mr. Trevino has had extensive experience with desert tortoises and educational outreach programs.

As an undergraduate student at Colorado State University, where Mr. Trevino received a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology, he also served as both research and laboratory assistant in clinical research on desert tortoises. In June of 1988, Mr. Trevino was a supervisor for the City of Greeley Park and Recreation Department.

NOTE CHANGE IN COMMITTEE ADDRESS

Please note that the Committee is no longer using the Ridgecrest P.O. Box as its primary address. All correspondence should now be addressed to:

Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, inc.
P.O. Box 2910
San Bernardino, CA 92406

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Summary Results of Study

Current livestock grazing on BLM allotments in hot desert areas risks long-term environmental damage while not generating grazing fee revenues sufficient to provide for adequate management. GAO found evidence of damage occurring on BLM lands as well as evidence of livestock grazing's adverse impacts on several wildlife species. Some damaged lands may take decades to recover if they recover at all. Grazing revenues returned to the U.S. Treasury do not cover current livestock grazing management costs, and, as previous GAO reports have shown, BLM's current level of spending is insufficient to perform all necessary range management tasks.

According to the most current data available, the economic benefits derived from livestock grazing on BLM lands in the hot desert areas are minimal. From a national perspective, the number of cattle and sheep in hot desert areas represents a small fraction of national totals. At a local level, BLM documents indicate that local economies do not depend on public lands ranching for survival.

GAO found that BLM lacks the staff resources necessary needed to collect and evaluate data measuring the impact of livestock grazing on many desert allotments. Without these data, BLM is not in

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Although data gathered in 1991 suggests that unauthorized activity in the area may be decreasing, it is not clear if this result is due to external factors or differences in survey techniques.

In any event, unauthorized use is occurring at levels inconsistent with the objectives of protection of desert tortoise habitat and other natural values.

OPPONENTS TAKE AIM AS ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT COMES UP FOR RENEWAL

Efforts to weaken the Endangered Species Act are on the current Congressional agenda due to growing concern about the increasing cost of preserving vanishing populations of plants and wildlife, particularly those on the verge of extinction, for whom last-ditch protective measures are the most costly.

The most threatening piece of anti-ESA legislation has already been introduced by Congressman Jim Hansen (R-Utah) and thirteen western Republicans who call their bill (H.R. 3092) the "Human Protection Act." It requires that "the potential economic benefits under ESA outweigh potential economic costs," effectively short-circuiting the Act's funding process. Although the intent of ESA is to protect species from the threat of extinction "as a consequence of economic growth and development," the Hansen formula uses an economic yardstick to justify extinction.

Hansen's proposal ignores the successful recovery of the California Condor, the Peregrine Falcon and the Black-footed Ferret, for example, whose survival could scarcely have been justified on economic grounds. Who can reckon the dollar value of a free-flying condor or a falcon soaring above the sea cliffs? No biologist can give you a number, and no Harvard M.B.A. would know where to begin.

Not to be outdone, the conservation community has its own legislative objectives, primarily efforts to streamline the cumbersome species-listing process, improve critical habitat designation, enhance recovery planning, strengthen enforcement provisions and insure adequate funding for conservation activities. Congressman Gerry Studds (D-Massachusetts), chairman of the Fish and Wildlife Subcommittee, has introduced an Endangered Species Act reauthorization bill, H.R. 4045, that embodies these aims.

(This article is a reprint from The Bridge newsletter December 1991.)

SPRING NATURALISTS AT THE DTNA

By Carol Panlaqui

This year we have two biologists serving as our Spring Naturalists. They have been on duty seven days a week and will be there through the end of May about ten hours a day. Like previous years' naturalists, they are using the Tortoise Discovery Center as their headquarters at the interpretive area. Tortoise sightings this year have been meager, but the wildflowers are spectacular and there has been an unusually large number of snake sightings, particularly of Mojave rattlesnakes.

Rande Gallant has had experience as a naturalist

and zoologist at the Trevor Teaching Zoo, Knott's Berry Farm, Natural Science Museum at Cal State Long Beach and, most recently, with Biosystems Analysis surveying for tortoises and other sensitive species. He graduated from Cal State Long Beach with a degree in Terrestrial biology/zoology. His main interest is in reptiles.

Steve Ogg recently graduated from Cal State San Bernardino where he majored in environmental studies. His past experience includes photography, tortoise studies and many summer jobs with scouting camps. Steve is capturing and preparing insects from the DTNA for display this spring. Both Steve and Rande will be working in the Riverside area as biologists this coming summer.



Rande Gallant (right) guides a group of visitors at the DTNA interpretive center.

Photo by Bev Steveson

SPECIAL THANKS TO PEGGY SCANLON

The Committee wishes to recognize the special contributions of our active member Peggy Scanlan.

In addition to her ongoing efforts as the Chairperson of the Committee's product sales, Peggy brought extra attention to the Committee this year by designating March as Desert Tortoise Awareness Month at her Lancaster styling salon.

During March, five percent of all service sales at Command Performance was donated to the Committee. In response to Peggy's initiative, Aveda Corporation agreed to match all funds donated by Command Performance. Peggy's Desert Tortoise Awareness Month was successful not only in raising funds for the Committee but also in spreading much-needed information about the threatened status of the desert tortoise. The promotion resulted in newspaper and television reports on the tortoise, the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, and the Committee.

Thanks a lot, Peggy!

DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE, INC.
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