



Fall  
2022  
Edition 42:3

# Tortoise Tracks

Newsletter



## Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

Next year, on Saturday, March 25, 2023 we will be gathering at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area to celebrate the Golden Anniversary of this very special preserve.

In preparing for the anniversary event, we are dedicating the next several issues of Tortoise Tracks to look back at the history of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee and its leadership roles in helping to create, preserve and steward the DTRNA with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

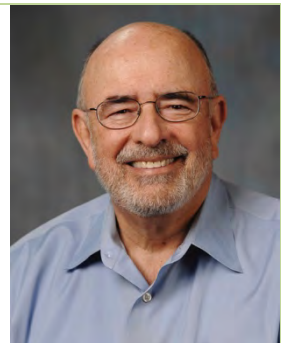
Starting with this issue we have organized our historical review by each decade and highlight key moments with archival photos and reflections of our past and current volunteers and leadership. We hope these articles will culminate in a 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Yearbook to commemorate a half century of conservation.

***From the beginning, the DTRNA was formed by a winning combination of 4 "Ps": Preservation, Public Outreach, Partnerships, and most of all People who have demonstrated remarkable prescience and perseverance.*** Today, as in the past, these attributes continue to inspire our work.

We start this journey, then, with thoughts from our President, Ron Berger.

### *A Special Thanks for a Special Place*

My wife Carol and I have had a life-long interest in conservation and preservation. Since digging up and incubating what turned out to be a snapping turtle egg when I was eight years old, I have been a turtle lover. In the 1990's while living on a 40 acre Christmas Tree farm in Oregon, we built and stocked a pond full of Western Painted Turtles and I had the honor of serving on the board of trustees of The Nature Conservancy.



A front-page article in the Palm Springs Desert Sun in 2006 reporting that the local rescue facility was inundated with Desert Tortoises and asking families with desert scaping to adopt some turned us into desert tortoise owners. We modified our property to be tortoise-friendly, adopted two that year, and as they decided to bless us with twelve hatchlings on each of the next several years, our interest in the plight of the tortoise in the wild grew. Clearly, tortoises had no problem replicating themselves.

Their problems appeared to be 100% man-made: loss of habitat, the introduction of invasive species, attraction of predators such as ravens and coyotes, dogs, etc., depletion of the water supply and, of course, climate change. Something had to be done to halt the decline in Desert Tortoise populations and to improve the living conditions of those that survived.

In seeking out the expert in the field, my associates at The Nature Conservancy directed me to Dr. Kristin Berry. And meeting with her introduced me to the amazing work that she and the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee she founded had been doing for so many years. When I was asked to serve on the board, and subsequently to serve as President, how could I refuse?

***Ron Berger***

## Timeline: The Founding Years in the 1970s

Early in the decade Richard M. Nixon was President followed by Jimmy Carter. Americans celebrated the first Earth Day in 1970 and in the same year Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act and subsequently the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act.

The California Endangered Species Act was enacted in 1970 and the federal Endangered Species Act was enacted in 1973. The Desert Tortoise was selected as the state reptile in 1972 under California Governor Ronald Reagan. Ed Hasteley was appointed BLM State Director in 1975 and served until 1999, the longest state director in history. The California Department of Fish and Game celebrates its 100 year anniversary in 1970.

Dr. Kristin Berry meets with U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to discuss protection of tortoises and establishing a preserve in Fremont Valley and the western Rand Mountains. BLM responds with identifying 2 square miles.	Fall 1972
Dr. Kristin Berry writes to J.R. Penny, California State Director of the BLM to propose a 10 square mile Natural Area.	28 November 1972
BLM begins process of withdrawal of public lands from mineral entry and the general land laws by surveying the area for mineral values (none found).	1973
Letters of support sent to the BLM by the Director of the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) and by ~100 others, including famous scientists (e.g., Robert C. Stebbins, Starker Leopold, G. Ledyard Stebbins), educators, and organizations (California Garden Clubs, Sierra Club).	Early 1973
Formation and first meeting of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.	2 June 1974
Notice of proposed mineral withdrawal was published in the Federal Register on March 6, 1975.	1975
BLM awards the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee a \$9,500 contract to provide educational materials, designs for an interpretive kiosk, pamphlets for the public, interpretive material for nature trails, and slide programs.	1976
Artist Jane S. Pinheiro prepared 16 ink and watercolor drawings for the interpretive kiosk and for the DTPC.	1976
The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee invited by The Nature Conservancy to become a Project Committee for land acquisition.	1976
The Preserve Committee, through many small private donations and large donations by founding Board members, raised funds for land acquisition.	1977 to 1978
Northern canyons in Rand Mountains were fenced and signed.	1978
BLM completes first Habitat Management Plan for the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area.	1979



## Habitat Acquisitions

In the Fall of 1973, the Natural Area expanded to 31 square miles with the publication of the *Interim Critical Management Program for Recreational Vehicle Users in the California Desert*, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), 1973 which covered a large area of a mix of public and private lands.

Thereafter in 1976, the Natural Area was further expanded to 39.5 square miles in the BLM's *El Paso Management Framework Plan*.

From 1977 to 1978, the Preserve Committee, through small private donations, raised monies to fund 1,440 acres in the northern part of the Natural Area, in the western Rand Mountain, in conjunction with The Nature Conservancy.



Archive: Early pictures of the Natural Area by Betty and Warren Forgey and accompanying original water color drawings by Jane S. Pinheiro. Betty, Warren, and Jane were founding members of the Preserve Committee and Betty Forgey served as our first President.

Jane Seymour Pinheiro (1907-1978) was a self-taught artist and botanist. Her watercolor paintings are so botanically correct that they are used for plant identification. Over 100 Pinheiro paintings reside in the Theodore Payne Foundation for Wildflowers and Native Plants collection. Jane was instrumental in establishing at least eight wildflower and wildlife sanctuaries including Saddleback Butte State Park and Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve State Natural Reserve. The Jane S. Pinheiro interpretive center at the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve is named in her honor.

### PURPLE MAT

*Nama demissum*

Waterleaf family

HYDROPHYLLACEAE

This annual is found on the flats and slopes of the Natural Area. In years of high rainfall the plant will be 12 to 15 inches across with many flowers. In a dryer year, it is a tiny tuft, hardly bearing leaves and plants may have but a single flower.



Purple Mat  
*Nama demissum*  
Hydrophyllaceae, Waterleaf family





## Protecting the Natural Area

From the beginning and continuing to date, when we acquire a critical mass of habitat we first post signs to protect against trespass – especially given historic OHV and grazing impacts – and collaborate with the BLM on management actions to further protect and restore habitat for the wildlife and flora of our preserve areas.

In the Fall of 1973, the BLM and our volunteers placed boundary signs closing the Natural Area to recreational vehicles. Thereafter in 1974, we were pleased to receive notice from the BLM that the Natural Area would be closed to grazing.

Our efforts received a significant boost in 1975 when the BLM received a Congressional appropriation of \$135,000 for the Natural Area, of which \$52,000 was used for perimeter fencing. By 1977, most of the Natural Area or 32.5 square miles was fenced.

By September 30, 1977, a revised proposed withdrawal of public lands in the Natural Area from mineral entry and general land laws was published in the Federal Register.

## Environmental Education

1973

Starting in the early parts of 1973, Dr. Kristin Berry began giving presentations and organizing letters to gain public support for the Natural Area. Dr. Berry's efforts kicked off our public outreach focus which resulted in formative initiatives:

Bev Steveson, a wildlife photographer, visits the Natural Area and begins her 30+ year portfolio of photographing tortoises, Mohave ground squirrels, kit foxes and many other species.

Betty Forgey, founding President, began making presentations and a lobbying campaign gain the support of the Desert Empire District of the Garden Clubs highlighting the need for fencing the Natural Area to protect it from sheep grazing and OHV use.

Archive: Kern-Kaweah Sierra Club newsletter featuring Betty Forgey and Dr. Berry.



## “Desert tortoises and relocation torture”

*This is story of Maximus, a desert tortoise that can't go home again. For some 50 years or more, no one can be certain, Maximus nibbled on his favorite desert flowers of the high Mojave Desert. His age is difficult to even estimate, since his shell plates are worn smooth and the age-lines obscured after many years and countless trips in and out of sandy burrows. His shell is mutilated, too – perhaps from an ancient coyote bite – making judgment of Maximus's age doubly difficult. But in his old age, Maximus has finally found a share of local fame. He is the largest California desert tortoise – if not the oldest – ever seen by biologists of the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG). He weighs 23 7/8 pounds and measures 15 inches across the shell. A 15-pound desert tortoise is a rarity; a 20-pound tortoise is almost unheard of. DFG Biologist James St. Amant of Pomona is caring for Max, trying to cure a respiratory ailment that has brought discomfort to reptilian old age. Sniffles and wheezing are not uncommon to the desert tortoise. This often occurs when tortoises are taken from the desert and brought to the relatively damp coastal zone. This what happened to Max. Someone found him in the desert and brought him to Los Angeles. A similar fate has befallen thousands of other desert tortoises, according to St. Amant... Gordon Coy, The Sun-Telegram, 1/22/1976*

1976

BLM awards the Preserve Committee \$9,500 for educational materials, designs for an Interpretive Kiosk, educational brochures about the desert tortoise and the Natural Area nature trails, and 3 slide programs for youth, general public, and scientific audiences prepared by Bev Steveson and Dr. Berry.

Artist Jane S. Pinheiro prepares 16 ink and watercolor drawings for the Interpretive Kiosk.

1978

First Tortoise Tracks newsletter published. Gloria Nowak, serves as our first newsletter editor. Gloria was key in gaining support from Representative Bill Thomas for the Natural Area.

Dr. Berry publishes “Tortoises for Tomorrow” in The Nature Conservancy News.

1979, February

Laura Stockton, a founding board member, leads the effort to prepare 10,000 educational booklets about the desert tortoise for the California Department of Education's “Conservation Week” distributed annually to California schools.



## Stewardship

1976

Congress appropriates \$135,000 for the DTRNA.

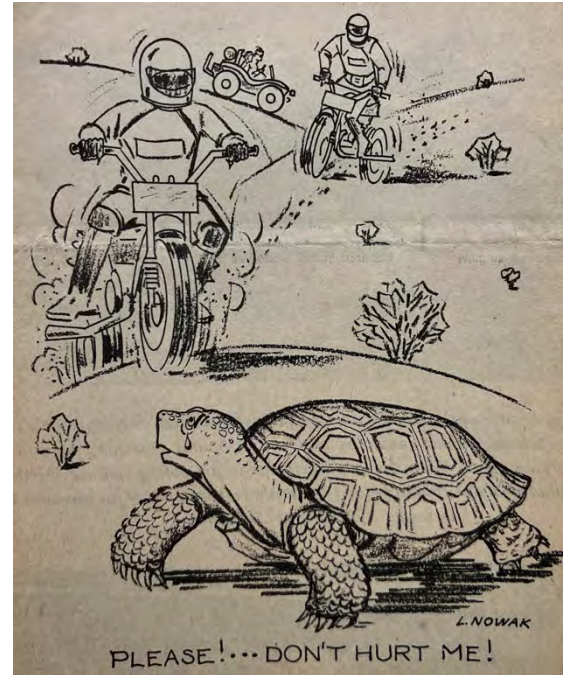
*“After adoption of the Desert Vehicle Management Plan, we put up signs telling people the area is closed to off-road vehicle use, and the next week we would find the signs torn down or shot up,” said Dick Harlow, Manager of the BLM Inyokern Resource Area. “Our present staff of Desert Rangers cannot possibly spend the time needed for property management and control of the natural area because they have too many miles to cover. The appropriations and funds received from the Tortoise Preserve Committee are part of the solution we have been waiting for.” B.L.M. Newsbeat, March 1976.*

1977

Most of the Natural Area was fenced encompassing 32.5 square miles and Preserve Committee volunteers and BLM rangers start fence monitoring.

1979, Spring

Dr. Berry and the BLM establish a long-term desert tortoise study plot at the Interpretive Center to compare populations inside and outside the perimeter fence.



## From Our Archives: Brief History of the DTPC June 1974-March 1976

*The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is composed of 15 concerned individuals from the communities of Boron, California City, Ridgecrest, Bakersfield, San Diego and Lancaster. Advisors to the Committee are Dr. Kristin Berry, Dr. Robert Stebbins, and Dr. Nathan Cohen. The Committee was formed to consolidate and continue the work by Dr. Kristin Berry of Ridgecrest.*

*Much of Dr. Berry's concern for the decreasing numbers of tortoises and loss of habitat centered on sheep grazing and the increased use of off-road vehicles. As a result of Dr. Berry's efforts, the proposed Preserve received protection of the closed status under the Bureau of Land Management's Interim Critical Management Program for Off-Road Vehicles in November 1973. This means that the area is closed to recreational vehicles of all kinds.*

*It was determined that fencing was the only way to definitively establish the Preserve boundary and thus eliminate off-road vehicle use and sheep grazing. Fundraising for the purchase of fencing materials was already underway when the Committee was formed. Urged by Betty Forgey of Boron, the Desert Empire District of the California Garden Clubs pledged \$4,000 for the fencing. Through the sale of small tortoise replica lapel pins for a \$1 contribution, the Garden Clubs of Lancaster, Barstow, California City, Ridgecrest, North Edwards, China Lake, and Boron, California, have raised in excess of \$5,000. In May 1975 the Committee launched the sale of T-shirts. The T-shirts were adorned with a smiling cartoon front end of a tortoise bearing "I may be slow ..." on the front and continued on the back with "But I get there!" behind the tortoise's hind quarters.*

## Save the Dates

Please email [DTPC@TORTOISE-TRACKS.ORG](mailto:DTPC@TORTOISE-TRACKS.ORG) or call (442)294-4258 to join our volunteer efforts:

**Fall Work Party:** Join your fellow members in our ongoing habitat monitoring of our conservation lands on Saturday, October 22<sup>nd</sup> at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**Preserve Monitoring:** Calling for volunteers to help us monitor or conservation lands in San Bernardino County within Mojave National Preserve, Piute Mountains Wilderness Area, Pilot Knob and in Riverside County in the Chuckwalla Desert Wildlife Management Area and Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

**50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the DTRNA:** Saturday, March 25, 2023

## Update: Our Endangered Species Petition

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife's desert tortoise status review is in process and it expects to deliver a report to the Fish and Game Commission at their February or April 2023 meeting. It is then up to the Commission to decide what future meeting they will discuss the status review, historically it is the next meeting. Stay tuned!

## Postponed: Western Joshua Tree Threatened Listing

The California Fish and Game Commission postponed a decision to list the western Joshua tree as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). Members voted unanimously on October 12 to continue their vote on the petition at their February 2023 meeting, allowing time for additional deliberation and tribal consultation. The tree's candidacy status remains in place in the interim. The Preserve Committee strongly supports listing the western Joshua Tree as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act.

## Volunteer Opportunities

Your help is welcome. Please [DTPC@TORTOISE-TRACKS.ORG](mailto:DTPC@TORTOISE-TRACKS.ORG), or call for additional information and ways to volunteer beyond land monitoring and semi-annual work parties.



Dedicated to the recovery and conservation of the Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) and other rare and endangered species inhabiting the Mojave and western Sonoran deserts.

**The Desert Tortoise  
Preserve Committee, Inc.**  
Founded 1974

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# Tortoise Tracks

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## DTPC MEMBERSHIP/CONTRIBUTION FORM

1. YES, I want to help save the threatened desert tortoise and its habitat! Here is my tax-deductible membership contribution of:

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Individual | <input type="checkbox"/> \$75 Sponsor     | <input type="checkbox"/> \$200 Patron/Corporate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$40 Family     | <input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Benefactor | <input type="checkbox"/> \$1000 Life Membership |

2. My membership is current but here is an additional donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_ . Please use it for:

- |                                       |   |  |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fencing      | <input type="checkbox"/> Land Acquisition | <input type="checkbox"/> Where Most Needed |
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3. I'd like to help you grow the DTPC Permanent Endowment. Please accept an additional donation of:

- |   |                                  |  |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> \$250  | <input type="checkbox"/> \$1,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$5,000       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$500  | <input type="checkbox"/> \$2,500 | <input type="checkbox"/> Other \$_____ |
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Let's grow the Permanent Endowment!

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I would like my contribution to remain anonymous | <input type="checkbox"/> I would like to receive <i>Tortoise Tracks</i> electronically (please provide email address) |
|---|---|

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Please make your check payable to **DTPC** and mail to:

**Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee**  
**PO Box 940**  
**Ridgecrest, CA 93556.**

Thank you.

\*All contributors receive the Tortoise Tracks newsletter. The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is an IRS recognized tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. Contributions and/or annual membership dues are tax-deductible, to the extent allowable by law. Contributor information is kept confidential and is not disclosed to third parties.

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