



Spring
2023
Edition 43:1

Tortoise Tracks

Newsletter



Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

The 1990's opened a new challenge for the DTPC when we took on the primary role for habitat acquisitions within the DTRNA after The Nature Conservancy reduced its involvement in 1991. By 1992, we launched a new initiative to protect lands outside the formal DTRNA boundaries, an effort that continues to this day. An article published on November 6, 1994 in The Daily News about the DTPC's 20th Anniversary captures the inflection point of the DTPC :

Raising \$1 million through grants, donations, and sales of T-shirts and plastic pins in the form of the reptile, the committee was able to acquire about 90 percent of the 9,000 acres of private land needed to form the preserve ...

Now the committee's work is focused on obtaining 1,500 more acres around the Desert Tortoise Natural Area to form a buffer zone, officials said.

In addition to our central role in habitat acquisitions, we significantly expanded our stewardship and educational initiatives.

This third commemorative issue of the 50th Anniversary of the DTRNA continues with a recollection by Dr. Kristin Berry, the co-founder of the DTPC.

Founding Inspiration

In 1971, the Division of Highways (later Caltrans) asked me to help move tortoises out of the path of construction for widening Highway 58 from two to four lanes. To determine where to place the translocated tortoises, I reviewed land ownership patterns in the western Mojave Desert, where tortoises were then quite common.

I was surprised and disappointed to learn that no area was free of sheep and cattle grazing, mining, and off-road vehicle recreation. I followed by asking the major land administrator, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), to establish a preserve for the desert tortoise in the western Mojave Desert, free of livestock grazing and off-road use. With the support of academicians, non-profit organizations, and individual citizens, the BLM outlined a place for a desert tortoise preserve in a 1973 management plan for recreation vehicles. The land was treated as closed to recreation vehicles.

With that joint success with the BLM, several of us continued to press forward with proposals for protective fencing, land acquisition, and facilities for education. That objective was met partially in 1980, with the formal Congressional designation of a fenced DTRNA without sheep grazing, vehicle use, and mining.

My initial objectives continue: acquire inholdings, expand the boundaries, enhance protection and restoration, and support education and research. Additional objectives are recovery of the tortoise population, reduction or elimination of hyper-predation by ravens, and increased visitor use and enjoyment. Tortoises for tomorrow, a long-term objective in 1978, remains omni-present for me. Nothing could have happened without the DTPC, the BLM, and many supporters. Some of the finest people I know and have known have been and are part of this effort.

Kristin H. Berry, Ph.D.
Co-Founder, Board Member



Timeline: The Innovation Years in the 1990s

In 1990, a United Nations report on climate change warns that global temperature rise might be as much as 2 degrees F in 35 years, recommends reducing CO₂ emissions worldwide. In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol adopted by US and 121 other nations, but not ratified by U.S. Congress. Sierra Club president Adam Werbach publishes a work describing different kinds of environmentalists, noting *“I don’t care why someone cares about the environment – Only that they do.”* During this decade, the DTPC and the BLM formalize their partnership with new initiatives:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Habitat Acquisition | In 1991, The Nature Conservancy transfers 140.08 acres to the DTPC which was acquired through our fundraising efforts. By 1992 we launch the “buffer zone” project to acquire and manage habitat adjacent to the DTRNA. |
| Protecting the DTRNA | In 1991, the BLM and DTPC formalize management roles and the Naturalist program in support of the DTRNA by signing a Cooperative Management Agreement. |
| Environmental Education | In 1991 we presented educational outreach programs for the San Bernardino Unified School District and launched our Mojave Desert Discovery Center multi-media program. |
| Stewardship | The DTPC implements a two-prong approach: legal action and focused research. In 1993, we joined national groups to secure a temporary restraining order on sheep grazing in prime tortoise habitat. In 1997 and 1999 we supported monitoring at the long-term interpretive plot at the DTRNA and Dr. Phillip Leitner’s multi-year Mojave ground squirrel research. |

Welcome Aboard, Caroline Champlin & Welcome Back, Freya Reder

Caroline joined the DTPC as a Part-Time Naturalist for the Spring 2023 season and a new role as part-time Ecologist to assist us with our weed and Raven nest monitoring projects, and social media and communications strategy. Caroline is currently stationed at the DTRNA with our full-time Naturalist Freya Reder, a seasoned veteran of our educational and research programs.

Prior to joining us she served as the outreach interpretive manager for the UC Berkeley Point Reyes Field Station while volunteering as a field technician on a mammal survey conducted by UC Berkeley and the National Park Service.

She also worked as a producer and reporter for KPCC Public Radio and as a reporter for the national business radio show, Marketplace. Perhaps most importantly for her field work at the DTRNA, she has extensive experience as a lifeguard.

Caroline earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Conservation and Resource Studies and B.A. in Rhetoric.



1990s: The Innovation Years



| | PUBLIC SUPPORT |
|-----------|--|
| 1994 | DTPC celebrates 20th Anniversary with barbeque at DTRNA |
| 1996 | Plaques honoring donors installed at the DTRNA interpretive kiosk |
| 1997 | CNN visits the DTNA |
| | BLM TAKES ACTION |
| 1991 | BLM and DTPC sign Cooperative Management Agreement for DTRNA management and Naturalist Program |
| 1991 | BLM receives \$700,000 from Land and Water Conservation Fund for DTRNA land acquisition |
| 1994 | DTPC provides financial support BLM in fencing 4 miles on western boundary of Natural Area |
| | HABITAT ACQUISITION |
| 1991 | The Nature Conservancy transfers 140.08 acres of DTRNA habitat to DTPC |
| 1992-1993 | DTPC acquires 288 acres adjacent to S.E. corner of DTRNA, kicking off buffer zone expansion project |
| 1993 | Only 2,383 acres of private in-holdings remain to be acquired inside DTRNA boundaries down from 10,855 acres in 1975 |
| 1993-1996 | DTPC receives \$400,000 for land acquisition in DTRNA buffer zone from the State Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program, 364 acres acquired in southeastern edge of the Natural Area |
| 1996 | A total of 30% of private land in Section 5 acquired, 70% remains to be acquired |
| | STEWARDSHIP ACTIONS |
| 1993 | DTPC supports temporary restraining order in March on sheep grazing in prime tortoise habitat with Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council |
| 1997 | DTPC participates in monitoring the long-term interpretive center plot at the Natural Area with funds and work force |
| 1999 | Dr. Phillip Leitner initiates multi-year Mohave ground squirrels research project |
| | ENVIRONMENTAL OUTREACH |
| 1990 | "Don't Turn Me Loose Video" Public Information Campaign kicks off |
| 1991 | DTPC receives funds from BLM and State OHV Commission for the Discovery Center and educational outreach program in the San Bernardino School District |
| 1994 | DTPC kicks off fundraising drive for permanent Mojave Desert Discovery Center and multi-media outreach program |
| 1994 | DTPC celebrates 20th Anniversary with barbeque at Natural Area |

49th Annual Meeting

We held our annual meeting on Saturday, January 21, 2023 with 35 people attending by Zoom. President Ron Berger chaired the meeting at which Dr. Kristin Berry, Greg Lathrop, and Laura Stockton were nominated and re-elected to the Board of Directors.

We are grateful to Holly Earle-Schultze and Sharon Newkirk who expertly coordinated our online meeting!

Following Board elections, Jun Lee, Interim Executive Director and Director of Land Acquisition reported on the following programs in 2022:

Land Acquisition

Acquired a total of 22.48 acres of habitat including a 2.48 acre parcel in Section 5 of the DTRNA donated by the Peters Living Trust and 20 acres in the Hwy 395 and 58 corridor of desert tortoise and Mojave ground squirrel habitat.

Continued to clear title on 154 acres within Alligator Rock ACEC in the Chuckwalla DWMA area of Riverside.

As of the end of 2022, the DTPC owns and manages a total of 7,115.15 acres: 5,410.97 acres in Kern County, 1,469.90 in San Bernardino County, and 234.28 acres in Riverside County.

Stewardship

Continued land monitoring, vertical and horizontal mulching and sign installation at the DTRNA and Expansion Areas. Our collaborator, American Conservation Experience (ACE), implemented three 8 day hitches, with funding by our OHV G-19 Green Sticker Fund grant.

Repaired 50 signs and performed trail maintenance during our Spring Work Party on March 25th and 26th. 30 volunteers led by Bonny Ahern and Craig Bansmer were joined by 15 volunteers from the Desert Survivors group. Special guests from Transition Habitat Conservancy Sam Easley, Executive Director and Sarah Berryman, Natural Resources Director, pitched in. Additionally, large border stones for the DTRNA trails were donated by Karen and Roy Sanders.

Surveyed 6 miles of eastern DTRNA fence line for future sign repairs, cleaned up trails and new interpretive kiosk panels, and set up our off-site storage unit for field supplies.

Monitored 326 parcels of our conservation lands in Kern, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties, with a special thanks to Mary Kotchwar Logan, Rachel Woodard, and Liam Connolly.

Research

Continued our Spring Raven nest monitoring of 101 nests or perch sites in around the DTRNA in March – April 2022 followed by egg oiling of 12 of 24 active nests.

Expanded the “address book” of our Raven nest monitoring to include other nest sites on electrical and telephone poles along Neuralia Road, Hwy 14, 20-Mule Team Road, and California City.

Special thanks to Ellie Baker, former Preserve Manager and Conservation Coordinator, Rachel Woodard, Steve Ishii and our collaborator Tim Shields, Hardshell Labs.

We especially recognize the dedication of our field monitors Bonnie Ahern, Craig Bansmer, Dan Burnett, Alexia Svedja, Mahmood (Noon) Mokhayesh, Vincent LeVeque, Tawni Gotbaum, Bob McGowan, Tina McGowan and Rachel Woodard.

Spring Naturalist Program

Welcomed 187 visitor groups (16 of which arrived on OHVs) at the DTRNA interpretive center from March 19 to mid-May 2022.

Special thanks to Tom Bickauskus and Rob Enriquez of the BLM, Karen Sanders of Friends of Jawbone, and Alexia Svejda.



Our 2022 Naturalist season showcased new interpretive kiosk panels which replaced the original panels installed in 1980 after 5 years of planning. The panels were funded by a California State Parks Outdoor Recreation grant.

Special thanks to Dr. Kristin Berry, Laura Stockton, and Rachel Woodard for curating the content; Chris Barela for graphic design, and Rob Enriquez of the BLM for his expert installation.

For Our Next Issue

At our annual meeting, Steve Ishii made a wonderful presentation of his raptor photo collection. A simple mention here is not nearly enough to describe his beautiful photos. We will feature his photos in the next issue of Tortoise Tracks. Stay tuned!

49th Annual Meeting

Ilene Anderson awarded the 2023 Golden Tortoise Award, the DTPC's highest honor.



Ilene Anderson, a Senior Scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) presented her keynote presentation, "Desert Tortoise: Efforts to Save the Species" prepared in conjunction with her colleague Lisa Belenky, Esq.

Ilene presented the following highlights of the CBD's legal advocacy for the desert tortoise and the Mohave desert:

BLM withdrawal of decision to allow grazing in desert tortoise habitat: CBD, in conjunction with the Western Watersheds Project and Wilderness Watch, prevailed in an appeal BLM's decision to allow cattle to cross public lands grazing allotments on the Mojave Desert side of the southern Sierra Mtns including the "Rudnick Allotment" which is permanently closed. See also [CBD Press Release: 2021-09-15](#)

Lawsuit vs. BLM and USFWS on Off-Road Routes: CBD, In conjunction with the Stanford Environmental Law Clinic, Desert Survivors, Sierra Club, California Native Plant Society, Defenders of Wildlife and Desert Tortoise Council, filed suit for the agencies' failure to adequately consider potential environmental damage before approving the West Mojave Route Network Project and plan amendments in 2019. See also [CBD Press Release-2021-09-16](#) and [CBD Press Release: 2021-03-24](#)

THE CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY'S MISSION: SAVING LIFE ON EARTH

At the Center for Biological Diversity, we believe that the welfare of human beings is deeply linked to nature — to the existence in our world of a vast diversity of wild animals and plants. Because diversity has intrinsic value, and because its loss impoverishes society, we work to secure a future for all species, great and small, hovering on the brink of extinction. We do so through science, law and creative media, with a focus on protecting the lands, waters and climate that species need to survive. We want those who come after us to inherit a world where the wild is still alive.

Ilene also updated our members on a number of high priority concerns that the CBD is tracking, including:

- Industrial Solar: Programmatic Environmental Impact Statements effecting 11 western states.
- Western Joshua Tree California State Listing Petition.
- Cadiz Water Mining Project.
- Management Plan for Red Rock Canyon State Park. [On April 4th, CBD sued the California State Parks and Recreation and the Park and Recreation Commission challenging the general plan revision which would allow OHV on 2 park roads and at the Ricardo Campground.]. [CBD Press Release: 2023-04-04](#)

"It's appalling that the state is willing to sacrifice such a biologically diverse gem when there are plenty of off-road vehicle areas surrounding the park," said Ilene Anderson. "Red Rock Canyon State Park is the crown jewel of conserved areas in the western Mojave Desert. How much desert land needs to be ruined for this type of recreation?"

- Gold Mining Projects: Oro Cruz exploratory drilling (Imperial), Conglomerate Mesa (Inyo), Castle Mtn mine expansion (San Bernardino), Exploratory drilling in desert tortoise critical habitat (near Johannesburg, Atolia, Red Mtn, Kern county).
- Lithium Mining Projects: 3 projects turning into lithium mines (Cadiz, Bristol, Cady, San Bernardino county), Panamint, Eagle Mtn (Inyo), Lithium Valley / Salton Sea (Imperial)
- Other Current Projects: Brightstar grazing pasture reconfiguration (Kern), Regional Conservation Investment Strategy (RCIS), Program Guidelines including guidance for Mitigation Credit Agreements, Statewide), Ivanpah-Control line upgrades from Bishop to Ivanpah area SCE/CPUC, BLM (scoping stage)



Photo courtesy of Freya Reder

49th Annual Meeting

Report by our BLM Partners



Tom Bickauskas
Field Manager
Ridgecrest Field Office
Bureau of Land Management

The BLM is proud to partner with DTPC. Since 1989 we've provided visitor services here in the middle of the desert, educating people about desert tortoises and the Mojave desert. Boondocking here in the desert isn't for everyone. Thankfully, with DTPC as our partner, Naturalists are hired and choose to live and work here April through June each year during the peak of visitation. A unique educational opportunity exists here, at the place where tortoises live naturally, for anyone wanting to come here. In addition to providing educational opportunities the naturalist monitors visitor activities in and around the DTRNA, discourages illegal or harmful activities, and reports such incidents to law enforcement as needed.

Within the viewshed of this place, one can see the evidence of development. Considering the slow growth and long life of the tortoise, development and use of the desert seems to be their enemy. Here on this site, you will find some development of our own. The educational panels on the kiosk stand year-round for those who visit, whether a Naturalist is present or not. The toilet helps make the area more friendly for visitors. The fences prevent driving into the area. So, some development is necessary to raise awareness of the desert tortoise's fragility.

Since 2016, my Field Office, the Ridgecrest Field Office, along with the other offices in the BLM California Desert District, uses an overarching land use plan amendment called the Desert Renewable Energy and Conservation Plan, or DRECP. As the name implies, its intent is to guide our consideration of renewable energy development and engage in conservation. The Ridgecrest Field Office has 35 Areas of Critical Environmental Concern covering 71% of the 1.8 million acres we manage. This latest land use plan amendment includes measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate effects to key species like the Mojave desert tortoise and Mojave ground squirrel. While the DRECP's adoption created areas for large-scale development of the desert, the DTRNA's existence was never in question.

This obscure, fenced off place in the desert was created 50 years ago through thoughtful action and will likely stand 50 more years into the future. With help from our agency partners and the DTPC, we look forward to improving the desert tortoise's habitat and its chances for recovery.



Lareina Van Sant
Wildlife Biologist
Ridgecrest Field
Office
Bureau of Land
Management

In 2022, the BLM Ridgecrest Field Office had a busy year supporting desert tortoise conservation with a range of strategic initiatives including:

- Installing a nine-mile fence on the border of the Spangler OHV expansion area and Fremont-Kramer ACEC (completed FY22)
- Supporting USFWS raven control efforts (DTRNA egg oiling)
- Updating the Ridgecrest Field Office's Invasive Species Management Environmental Assessment
- Hiring Lareina Van Sant as our new Wildlife Biologist, and two Natural Resource Specialists hired in 2022 to assist with development of a more expansive programmatic plan
- Continuing restoration to implement the travel management program: vegetation restoration, incursions/illegal routes, vertical/horizontal mulch, obstructions, and follow-up monitoring
- Surveying for Invasive, Non-Native Plants at the DTRNA (By the DTPC, June 2022)

Going forward, the BLM's priorities for supporting the DTRNA in 2023 includes:

- **50th Anniversary of the DTRNA:** Preparations included new interpretive signs (dog waste education is included), filling in an open pit near the outhouse, maintenance of the entrance fence and roads.

In fact, the BLM provided all of the 'hardware' for the celebration including chairs, tables, tents, and podium and stage, sound system, and so much more.

- **On-going projects:** Continuation of Raven egg oiling project, habitat restoration, invasive weed mapping and treatments.
- **New challenges:** Continuing renew the DTRNA mineral withdrawal and including mineral withdrawal of a newly proposed expansion of the management areas adjacent to the DTRNA.

Volunteer Opportunities:

Please email DTPC@TORTOISE-TRACKS.ORG or call (442)294-4258 to help us manage the DTRNA and desert tortoise habitat.

Updates:

Spring 2023 Work Party: A special thank you to Roger Dale, Jun Lee, Liam Connolly, Mahmood (Noon) Mokhayesh and family, Mr. and Mrs. Vincent LeVeque and Laura Stockton for setting up and cleaning the Naturalist and Discovery Center trailers, clearing the nature trails, and monitoring the perimeter fence at the DTRNA on March 18th. Their work helped set the stage not only for the Spring Naturalist season but also the 50th anniversary event.

Spring 2023 Work Party [2.0]: We are very grateful to Bob and Christine Young (pictured below) who installed signs along the western expansion area at the conclusion of the 50th Anniversary. Bob and Christine were planning to visit the London Bridge in Arizona the next day, but extended their stay to continue installing signs for a total of 1.5 miles of new signs abutting a heavily-used OHV route.



Bob and Christine Young does the hard work of replacing worn and damaged signs at the DTRNA western expansion area.

Notably this photo also illustrates the natural and healthy condition of habitat within the protected areas of the DTRNA compared to degraded habitat outside of the fence line.

Desert Tortoise Endangered Species Petition: The California Department of Fish and Wildlife's desert tortoise status review continues and it expects to deliver a report to the Fish and Game Commission at their February or April 2023 meeting.

Western Joshua Tree Endangered Species Petition: On February 7, 2023, the California Governor's office made public proposed legislation that would protect the western Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*) through a trailer bill titled **Western Joshua Tree Conservation Act** ([WJTCA](http://www.wjtca.org)). The WJTCA aims to protect the western Joshua tree at a landscape scale, while also providing a streamlined permitting and mitigation approach using in-lieu fees. If passed, this bill would be the first legislation to specifically focus on protecting a species from threats of climate change. On the heels of this announcement, the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) voted on February 8, 2023, to postpone their decision on listing the western Joshua tree as a threatened species under the California Endangered Species Act. The decision to postpone was in direct response to the newly proposed legislation. The Commission will take into consideration the outcome of the proposed legislation, expected in July 2023, before taking a final vote on the listing status.



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

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|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| <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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|--|----------------------------------|--|
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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) |
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Thank you.

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