



Tortoise Tracks

Newsletter

SPECIAL ISSUE: A TRIBUTE TO DAVID MYERS

There's an old saying in investing, written a few different ways (and attributed to a few different sources), the gist of which is: "Buy land – they ain't making any more of it." It's also good advice for wildlife conservation, and no one understood that better than David Myers, co-founder of The Wildlands Conservancy, whose recent passing warrants more than a few words.

You may recall from our spring issue that we planned to devote much of this quarter's newsletter to Chuckwalla National Monument. However, instead, we are going to highlight Myers' life and work. In a world where even the staunchest conservation advocates sometimes feel helpless, David was someone who proved repeatedly that one person can make a difference. He was truly a force of, and for, nature – as you'll read in moving tributes by former DTPC President Ron Berger and current president Roger Dale.

DESERT TORTOISE OFFICIALLY DECLARED ENDANGERED IN CALIFORNIA

As of June 12th, 2025, the Mojave desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), listed as "threatened" in California since 1989, has been uplisted to "endangered" under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). The California Fish and Game Commission formalized the decision based on current scientific data and after years of advocacy by the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, the Desert Tortoise Council, and Defenders of Wildlife, who together petitioned the Commission for the uplisting in March 2020.

Being in danger of extinction is never good, of course, but endangered status under CESA has significant advantages for tortoise conservation. Access to conservation funding is always competitive; basically, when you're endangered, you move closer to the head of the line. That means a better chance for government grant money for things like land acquisition and habitat restoration. And it's not just about government help; endangered status also means more public attention, which can lead to more individuals, organizations, and businesses wanting to do their part. So yes, this is actually great news. We'll have more details in future issues, to be sure!



Photo: Tom Astle

DAVID MYERS IS GONE, BUT HIS LEGACY WILL SURVIVE FOREVER

by Ron Berger of the DTPC Board
Photos courtesy of The Wildlands Conservancy



David Myers, who co-founded The Wildlands Conservancy in 1995, passed away in March. Under his leadership the Conservancy preserved more than 500,000 acres in San Bernardino County alone!

Myers also spearheaded the fight to create the 154,000-acre Sand to Snow National Monument, which extends from the Sonoran Desert floor up to over 10,000 feet in the San Bernardino National Forest, about 90 minutes east of Los Angeles.

“David Myers was an inspirational and tireless crusader for wild spaces,” said Peter Gavin, founder of the Center for Biological Diversity. “Anyone concerned with the health of majestic landscapes from Southern California’s Mojave Desert to Northern California’s Eel River, stands in his debt.”

“David also worked harder than anyone I know in the conservation movement,” he said, “to introduce low-income kids and their families to natural realms beyond their neighborhoods.”

After a tireless campaign to convince the state of California to acquire thousands of acres for what is now Chino Hills State Park, David found his way to Pioneertown where the next chapter in his visionary conservation story started.

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REMEMBERING DAVID MYERS *(Continued from Page 2)*

David saw the natural beauty of the mountainous desert landscape and understood that the spirit of the community depended on that beauty. He and his brother started buying parcels across Pioneertown to be included in the Pioneertown Mountains Conservation Plan and then sought “conservation-minded buyers” for the parcels through advertisements in the LA Times. It was through these classified ads that David met David Gelbaum, and together they partnered to found The Wildlands Conservancy.

Together they began strategically buying up land to link the San Bernardino, San Jacinto, and Big Horn Mountains and inholdings within Joshua Tree National Park. Those purchases totaled 70 square miles.

The conservancy's next big purchase was a 97,000-acre ranch in the foothills of the San Emigdio Mountains, northwest of Gorman, which once had been slated for a massive luxury home development. Renamed Wind Wolves, it is now the largest privately owned nature preserve on the West Coast.

David's vision for the area included reintroducing animals that had once been native inhabitants, including tule elk and bighorn sheep, and obliterating man-made intrusions, such as a rock quarry, petroleum waste pits, fences and roads. He said the process would enable visitors the increasingly rare experience of looking “face-to-face” at something that is truly wild. He called it “rewilding” the land. Today, endangered San Joaquin kit foxes and blunt-nosed leopard lizards thrive along with reintroduced tule elk, blacktail deer, great horned owls and bobcats. It also is home to marine fossils and Chumash paintings considered among the most impressive examples of Native American rock art.

The Conservancy's crowning achievement was acquiring almost 1,000 square miles – about 570,000 acres – of desert land stretching from Barstow to Needles that had been owned by Catellus Development Corporation, the real estate division of the Santa Fe Pacific Railroad. David led the complex negotiations, finalizing the largest section of the deal in 2000 at a cost of \$30 million in Conservancy funds and \$15 million from federal sources.

The acquisition kept the land out of the hands of a developer with plans to carve its spectacular rock ranges, lava flows, sand dunes, valleys and cactus gardens into 40-acre ranches. David and his team donated all the purchased land to the public – the largest conservation land gift in U.S. history – greatly expanding Joshua Tree National Park, the Mojave National Preserve and the Bureau of Land Management wilderness areas, which reconnected a massive corridor for wildlife.

The Wildlands Conservancy proposed these donated lands to become Mojave Trails National Monument. After several attempts by desert champion Dianne Feinstein to create the National Monument legislatively, the Wildlands Conservancy rallied the presidents and executive directors of almost every national environmental organization to join Wildlands in petitioning President Obama, with the support of Senator Dianne Feinstein, to create the National Monument, as many presidents have done in the past, by using The Antiquities Act.

On February 12, 2016, President Obama designated the 1.6-million-acre Mojave Trails National Monument by executive order using The Antiquities Act. Senator Feinstein and The Wildlands Conservancy's Executive Director at the time, David Myers, met President Obama in the Oval Office to celebrate. This was the pinnacle of an almost twenty-year effort to preserve the heart of the Mojave Desert for conservation, recreation, and unparalleled inspiration.

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REMEMBERING DAVID MYERS (Continued from Page 3)

Here's just a small portion of what David Myers' leadership accomplished:

- A portion of California's largest cactus garden
- Pisgah Lava Flow – the most researched area in N. America for the effects of volcanism on evolution
- Amboy Crater – a National Natural Landmark
- Sleeping Beauty Valley – the last intact valley representing the West Mojave plant associations
- Cady Mountains – one of the best areas in the Mojave to see bighorn sheep
- Afton Canyon – the Mojave River flows year-round amid colorful canyon walls
- Marble Mountains Fossil Beds – site of 550 million-year-old fossils of trilobites, which are among the first animals on earth with eyes and skeletons
- Wildlife and recreational corridors that connect two national parks and 13 wilderness areas – a refuge for campers and explorers, bighorn sheep, desert tortoises, and fringe-toed lizards

In all, David was directly involved with protecting nearly 2.3 million acres of public and private lands. Now, the Conservancy owns about 208,000 acres across California, Oregon and Utah – the vast majority in California – where the preserve system sees more than 1.4 million people each year. The group also provides free outdoor education on its lands, reaching over 25,000 low-income students and families a year. The programs at Wind Wolves, Oak Glen, Whitewater and Mission Creek preserves in San Bernardino County have provided many of the children their first experiences with the state's natural wonders.

"David was a man of courage, ambition and a boyish enthusiasm that was infectious," Wildlands Conservancy's current Executive Director Frazier Haney said. "He left us with a lot of big dreams and the tools needed to make them come true."

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REMEMBERING DAVID MYERS (Continued from Page 4)

David came up with the Conservancy's motto, "Behold the Beauty," which Haney said captures the spirit of his longtime friend and mentor.

"David's vision of conservation was one not simply based on science, but also based on the way the natural beauty can improve human lives... [and is] a symbol of the environmental health," Haney said. He called him audacious in the best way.

"I'll never know another person like David. I'll miss that kind of reality-bending power that he had," Haney said.

I've been privileged to meet many brilliant visionaries over the course of my career, but few, if any, were as driven and focused as David Myers. I first met David at the Conservancy's Whitewater Preserve in 2014, when they hosted an event celebrating the 20th anniversary of the late U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein's California Desert Protection Act of 1994. In the few seconds I had with him and with Senator Feinstein I expressed our concern about the DRECP. Both were somewhat surprised, and David invited me to visit with him at his offices in Oak Glen.

I arrived with a pair of recently hatched desert tortoises which he and everyone there couldn't stop admiring and playing with. David told me he'd had a lifelong love of desert tortoises and would do everything in his power to help them. And he did.

His passing, while a great loss, reminds us of the immense power each of us has to make a lasting difference for good. David built furniture for a living. He wasn't born wealthy. He didn't make a fortune. But his passion, drive, commitment and perseverance were infectious, and all of us, tortoises and humans alike, should be forever grateful.

Thank you, David.



REMEMBERING DAVID MYERS' SUPPORT OF THE DTPC

by Roger Dale, DTPC President

It was the DTPC's great fortune to get acquainted with David Myers in the fall of 1995. Within what seemed like just a few months, David had emerged as the public face of The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) – an upstart organization that was buying and protecting huge acreages of land throughout the Mojave Desert (among other places) at a breathtaking pace.

At the time, the DTPC was taking initial steps to pursue what would become the single largest land acquisition in our organization's history. We had become aware that a 1,360-acre cattle ranch encompassing critical desert tortoise habitat was for sale. More significant than the land itself, the ranch served as the "base property" for a 49,000-acre grazing allotment ("Pilot Knob") on federal land. That meant that buying the ranch would also present the rare opportunity to retire the associated grazing allotment, resulting in the protection of over 50,000 acres of habitat.

While the opportunity seemed monumental, the \$450,000 asking price – representing pretty much all of the DTPC's spendable resources at the time – gave pause to our plans. David Myers and The Wildlands Conservancy came into our orbit at just the right time! David immediately recognized the importance of this purchase and, after a couple of phone calls to discuss details, the DTPC and TWC became 50/50 partners in the deal. I learned quickly that David thought big and moved fast. He was instrumental in encouraging the DTPC to go ahead with the purchase, negotiating a more affordable price (\$375,000) with the seller, guiding us on the full range of due diligence needed for this complex transaction, and supporting our coordination with the Bureau of Land Management to place the grazing allotment under a conservation closure.

The Pilot Knob property – located 25 miles southeast of Ridgecrest on the east side of Cuddeback Dry Lake adjacent to the Naval Air Weapons Station – is still owned and managed by the DTPC. It's no exaggeration to say that this acquisition would never have happened without David Myers. Thank you, David!



2025 SPRING NATURALIST SEASON WRAPUP

The Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area's naturalist season runs from mid-March to early June each year, with much-appreciated funding support from the Bureau of Land Management's Ridgecrest Field Office. Despite a dry winter, resulting in a somewhat muted display of spring annuals, the DTRNA hosted more visitors this spring than in 2024 – 741 people, vs. 640 last year, a 16% increase! Not only that, more than a quarter of visitors reported seeing a tortoise, often with the help of onsite naturalists Nadia and Madison.

In addition to being on hand to help visitors by answering questions, giving advice, and conducting tours, Nadia and Madison performed critical work on and around the property, including fence repairs, reporting illegal trash dumping, wildlife observations and recording, and land monitoring. Thank you, Madison and Nadia, for making the DTRNA's 37th consecutive springtime naturalist program a tremendous success!



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.

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Founded 1974

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Photo: Tom Astle

LOOKING AHEAD TO SUMMER

Desert Tortoises retreat to their burrows during the hot days of summer – a period of rest and inactivity called aestivation – but the Tortoise Committee never sleeps! We hope to be able to report news soon on several fronts, including exciting new funding partnerships, our help with relocating threatened wildlife displaced by development, and plans for additional raven control efforts in and near the DTRNA. Stay tuned!

And as always, if you or anyone you know wants to help us help desert tortoises (and the rest of the animals and plants that live alongside them), please consider becoming a volunteer and/or making a donation – whether that means renewing your membership, upping your membership level, or making a larger donation or bequest to our permanent endowment.



Photo: Tom Astle



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

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☐ Where Most Needed

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☐ \$1,000

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