

# Tortoise Tracks

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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

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## ANNUAL AWARDS PRESENTATIONS

Five very special people and one exceptional agency were honored at the Preserve Committee's annual banquet on January 11 in Victorville. Two received the Committee's highest honor, the prestigious **Golden Tortoise Award**, for exceptional and sustained service to the preservation of the desert tortoise and its habitat.

**Marc Sazaki** - Mr. Marc Sazaki, of the California Energy Commission, was acknowledged by the Preserve Committee with a presentation of the **Golden Tortoise Award** for his almost 20 years of service to the desert tortoise and its habitat.

He was recognized for espousing sound conservation and management of California's wildlife and diligently working to solve conflicts between wildlife and resources and development projects. He has played a critical role in seeking and securing funds to implement new ideas and to evaluate the effectiveness of untested mitigation measures. He also worked to establish land banks for mitigation, setting examples whereby conservation organizations and utility companies and other developers could acquire land for rare, threatened and endangered species.

The desert tortoise and its habitat have benefited from his leadership on many projects, including the Kramer solar plant, co-generation projects, the Harper Lake Road solar project, and the Highway 58 fence and culvert monitoring project.

**Kirk Waln** - Mr. Kirk Waln, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) joined the Ventura office in the early 1990s representing the agency as one of its tortoise biologists. Since then, Kirk has drafted Biological Opinions for federal projects that *may affect* the federally listed desert tortoise. As the primary author of numerous opinions, he has been responsible for determining terms and conditions, or mitigation measures, that would protect tortoises during construction projects in occupied desert tortoise habitats.

Although it is Kirk's job to draft Biological Opinions, the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee has been very impressed with his conscientiousness and dedication to desert tortoise conservation, which goes far beyond his normal job description. Among other things, he has assisted the Bureau of Land Management in planning the West Mojave Coordinated Management Plan and represented the USFWS in numerous public meetings. For the past five years, he has represented the USFWS in many formal and informal consultations under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, and in so doing, has protected the desert tortoise and its habitats.

He has also volunteered his time to the Desert Tortoise Council as an instructor at several of the annual Survey Techniques Workshops.

Given his excellent track record as a proponent for desert tortoise conservation, the Committee presented Kirk with the **Golden Tortoise Award**

**Tracy Goodlett** - Ms. Tracy Goodlett of Ridgecrest, a biologist with On Track Consulting and Research was acknowledged for her role in the recovery and return to the desert of a tortoise she witnessed being taken by two poachers near Kramer Junction on October 16, 1996.

Ms. Goodlett pursued the vehicle to obtain its license plate number and then spent several hours trying to locate authorities on a holiday to report what she had seen. Her diligence and perseverance led to the apprehension and citation of the poachers, as well as the rescue of the tortoise. Based on her careful field observations at the time of the incident, she was able to return the tortoise to the proximity of its home site.

**Art Tracey** - Officer Art Tracey, of the Bureau of Land Management, was commended for his continued and dedicated law enforcement efforts to apprehend people who illegally exploit threatened and endangered wildlife, including the desert tortoise.

His concern about poachers and his special efforts to monitor locations where they are suspected to operate resulted in the successful apprehension of two collectors. In February 1996, he observed several people engaged in suspicious activities and apparently taking wild tortoises from the west Mojave Desert near the I-15 freeway. He pursued and arrested them, and in the process, rescued three desert tortoises, which were being prepared for transport out of the desert.

**Dr. Joan Schneider** - Dr. Schneider, the evening's featured dinner speaker, was also recognized for her service to the Preserve Committee with a certificate of appreciation and a framed photo of a desert tortoise taken by Board member, **Bev Steveson** on the Natural Area. A Staff Research Associate and Assistant Research Anthropologist at the University of California, Riverside, Dr. Schneider's illustrated booklet, *The Desert Tortoise and Early Peoples of the Western Deserts*, prepared for the Committee has proven to be quite popular. Almost all 3500 copies have been distributed. She has visited Blackwater Well to evaluate the site's cultural resources and review a prior application for nomination of Blackwater Well to the State Historical Register. The Committee is looking forward to a continuing and mutually rewarding relationship with Dr. Schneider.

**Air Force Flight Test Center at Edwards Air Force Base** - The Air Force Flight Test Center (AFFTC) at Edwards Air Force Base (Base) was awarded a certificate acknowledging its staff for their continued commitment to desert tortoise conservation.

A few of the contributions made by AFFTC over the past few years include:

- As of 1995, AFFTC consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 32 times for proposed projects on the 470-square mile Base. This indicates a very proactive effort on behalf of AFFTC to minimize impacts to tortoises.

- Between 1992 and 1993 the entire base was surveyed for tortoises to inventory the population, facilitate environmental review, and minimize impacts to tortoises.
- AFFTC continues to support the research efforts of Dr. William Boarman to further study the relationships between common ravens and landfills and impacts to tortoises on the Base and adjacent areas.
- In 1995 AFFTC and NASA, Fryden Flight Center provided the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee with 180 copies of the film, *The Desert Tortoise, a Delicate Balance*, which is endorsed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and used by the Desert Tortoise Council as an educational tool for construction personnel working in occupied desert tortoise habitat.
- In 1996 AFFTC made more than 3,500 copies of Dr. Joan Schneider's booklet, *The Tortoise and Early Peoples of the Western Deserts*, which was published and distributed by the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee.

For these and other contributions to the desert tortoise and its conservation, the Preserve Committee extended its thanks to AFFTC's representative, Mr. John Franz.

## **FIRST PHASE OF HARPER LAKE ROAD FENCE CONSTRUCTION COMPLETED**

This spring the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee completed construction of the first phase of a tortoise-proof fence along Harper Lake Road in San Bernardino County. The fence construction project is the fulfillment of a major mitigation agreement which the Preserve Committee signed two years ago.

In July of 1995 the Preserve Committee entered into an agreement to assume responsibility for the construction of a tortoise-proof fence along Harper Lake Road. Harper Lake Road is in the Mojave Desert just east of Kramer Junction ("Four Corners") and extends north from Highway 58. It serves as the access road to a major solar energy facility constructed in the late 1980s. The area is prime desert tortoise habitat. As part of the permitting process for the facility, the government agencies involved--the California Energy Commission, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game--determined that the most effective way to prevent tortoise mortalities from the vehicular traffic associated with the energy plant would be to construct a tortoise-proof fence along Harper Lake Road. This mitigation measure was included as a requirement in the approval of the facility.

Several years after the solar energy plant began operation, the permitting agencies and conservation groups became very concerned that Harper Lake Companies (HLC)--the private firm operating the plant--had not followed through on its obligation to build the tortoise protective fence. HLC claimed that the fence project had proven to be infeasible due to

difficulties in obtaining permission from private landowners to build the fence along the edges of their properties. HLC requested that the requirement for a fence be dropped and a long series of hearings ensued. The Preserve Committee participated in these hearings and strongly urged the California Energy Commission to maintain the requirement that a fence be built.

The agencies ultimately threatened to shut down the plant if HLC did not fulfill its original obligation to build the fence. This rather complicated situation presented a unique opportunity for the Preserve Committee to become involved. The eventual outcome was that, in July of 1995, the Preserve Committee entered into an agreement with the agencies to assume responsibility for constructing the fence. In return for accepting this responsibility, HLC made a one-time payment to the Preserve Committee of \$489,000. HLC was then relieved of its obligation to build the fence. The \$489,000 was to be for the following purposes:

- The purchase of fence construction easements from landowners along the road;
- The provision of monitoring along the road (by qualified biologists) during tortoise activity periods (spring and fall) to prevent vehicular mortalities prior to completion of the fence;
- Construction of the fence;
- Construction of tortoise crossings (underground culverts); and
- Project management.

The total road frontage to be fenced was 11.8 miles (both sides of a 5.9-mile stretch of the road).

Upon signing the agreement in July of 1995, the Preserve Committee immediately initiated communication with the 60 private landowners along the affected portion of Harper Lake Road. The contacts involved a series of letters, which periodically updated the landowners on the status of the project and encouraged their participation. In many cases the Preserve Committee's development consultant--Mr. Jun Lee--traveled to meet the land owners in person to further explain the project and to address their individual concerns. This approach to communicating with the land owners proved to be very effective--by late 1996 the Committee had secured permission to build the fence from land owners representing about 50 percent of the total Harper Lake Road frontage. This 50 percent "threshold" provided enough participation to begin construction of the first phase of the fence.

After a very thorough selection process in which twelve firms were asked to submit detailed bids, Golden State Fence Company was selected to construct the first phase of the fence. Golden State is based in Riverside, California and has considerable previous experience in constructing tortoise protective fencing. In addition to its technical qualifications, Golden State was also selected on the basis of competitive pricing and a well-prepared proposal document.

Construction of the first phase of the fence (including access gates for landowners who requested them) began in early March and was completed in mid May. The total contract cost for the first phase of fence construction was approximately \$127,000.

During the fence construction, the Preserve Committee provided on-site biological monitoring to prevent tortoises from being injured or killed by the construction activities. These monitoring

services were provided by On-Track Consulting and Research. On-Track was also retained by the Preserve Committee to oversee the actual fence construction work to ensure quality control.

### ***Next Steps***

The Preserve Committee is actively continuing its effort to get all of the private landowners along Harper Lake Road to grant fence construction easements. Some of the landowners were reluctant to participate due to concerns about how the fence would affect the visual attractiveness of their properties. To counter these concerns, the Committee will offer to take these landowners on a field trip to see the completed first phase of the fence. Jun Lee, who has been in close contact with these property owners for almost two years, expects that they will become more enthusiastic about participating in the project once they see how attractive the first phase of the fence is.

Based on current indications from the remaining property owners, the Preserve Committee hopes to secure the remaining easements in time to begin the second phase of fence construction in late 1997. Scheduling the construction during the winter, when tortoises are typically inactive, will minimize the need for biological monitoring during the building process.

by Roger Dale

## **SPRING TORTOISE SURVEY AT DTNA NEARING COMPLETION**

As discussed in the Fall 1996 *Tortoise Tracks*, the long-term study plot for desert tortoises at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area Interpretive Center was scheduled to be surveyed this spring. This year the project is being coordinated by the Committee, but is a cooperative effort of several agencies and a number of individual volunteers.

There are three parts to the survey covering 3 square miles around the Interpretive Center: 1) the 180 days of searching for and processing of desert tortoises; 2) the survey of 9 vegetation transects; and 3) a special survey of human impacts throughout the plot. Less than 1/3 of the fieldwork is being done by contracted field workers. The rest is being completed by agency biologists, who in most cases are adding this to their normally demanding workload; by Committee members; and by other volunteers. Volunteers donating time and expertise include Dan Christenson, Chuck Hemingway, Kevin Emmerich and Steve Boland, John Hoover and Sandra Barclay. Committee members contributing time, expertise and materials are Laura Stockton, Karen Spangenberg, Bev Steveson, Bob Brooks and Mary Shepherd. Agency biologists involved are Kristin Berry of USGS, Biological Resources Division, Marc Sazaki of the California Energy Commission, Bob Parker and Joyce Schlacter of the Bureau of Land Management, and Frank Hoover of California Department of Fish and Game. Contracted field biologists include Tim Shields, Mercy Vaughn, Peter Woodman and Denise Laberteau. The successful completion of this survey would not be possible without the combined efforts of these individuals and agencies.

In spite of an early and unusually warm spring, over 70 tortoises had been found by early May. We are hopeful that the analysis of the data being collected will indicate that the population decline has leveled off.

by Laura Stockton

## **PILOT KNOB SUMMARY FOR 1996**

During 1996, the Preserve Committee sponsored Audry Jones, a volunteer with the Ridgecrest Office, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), as on-site host/interpreter at Blackwater Well. From February to July, she lived at the cabin at Blackwater Well, performed periodic checks of the structures and waterlines, interfaced with the public visiting the area, distributed visitor interpretive materials, and assisted BLM Wildlife Biologists with a desert tortoise survey. The process of providing an on-site host/interpreter included signing an *Interim Agreement* with the BLM to develop a Memorandum of Understanding or Cooperative Management Agreement to protect the biological and cultural resources of Blackwater Well and the Pilot Knob Allotment by pursuing an amendment to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (CDCAP) to permanently retire the grazing permit for the allotment. The Preserve Committee owns the "base property" (totaling two and an eighth square miles) within the boundaries of the 70 square mile Pilot Knob grazing allotment.

Members of the Desert Survivors, a group from the San Francisco Bay area, volunteered at the DTNA spring work party, March 23-24, and camped at Blackwater Well during their stay. That Sunday morning, members of the group, along with several Preserve Committee Trustees, completed an extensive inventory of the buildings, structures, corrals, and scrap materials in the vicinity of the old ranch headquarters. Members of the Desert Survivors returned to participate in the DTNA fall work party, October 26-27. The storage building adjacent to the cabin was cleaned of hazardous materials and debris, which were removed from the site with the assistance of the BLM - Ridgecrest Area Office.

In December, Dr. Joan Schneider, an anthropologist at University of California, Riverside, visited Blackwater Well to evaluate the site's cultural resources and review a previous application for nomination of Blackwater Well to the State Historical Register. Accompanying Dr. Schneider and Board member Karen Spangenberg was Ridgecrest resident and DTPC volunteer, Sterling Kendrick, who will monitor the allotment, including ranch buildings and out lying water tanks, with periodic trips to the area.

A grazing application for "non-use" was filed with the BLM for the 1997 season.

Future Plans for 1997 at Blackwater Well and the Pilot Knob Allotment include commencement of long-term photo monitoring, continued pursuit of a nomination to the State Historical Register, continuing the host/interpreter program, maintenance of water improvements for wildlife, and amendment of the CDCAP.

by Karen Spangenberg

## **PRESERVE COMMITTEE BOARD WELCOMES THREE NEW MEMBERS**

Three new members have joined the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's Board of Trustees this year.

***Bob and Letty Brooks*** - Two of the three new Board members installed at the Committee's annual banquet in January are Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Brooks. Bob and Letty, long time residents of Whittier, California, come to the Board with complementary backgrounds in corporate business experience (his), environmental science & education (hers), and environmental activism (both).

Bob, our new DTPC Board President, was employed in the aerospace industry for more than 35 years working for Aerojet General, Rockwell International, and Boeing North American. For the last 16 years, he was the Director of Subcontracts with responsibility for in excess of \$200 million per year in expenditures on the Space Station and Shuttle Orbiter programs. Bob retired from Boeing at the end of April 1997.

Letty has been a part time and full time school teacher for 35 years. Her most recent assignment has been as a middle school science teacher. She will retire this June. She is a long time member of the Audubon Society, Native Plant Society, L.A. Mycological Society and has been a Sierra Club, Rio Hondo Section hike leader. She is an outdoor education docent for Whittier Narrows Nature Center, Friends of the Whittier Hills, and has served on the Whittier City Hillside Task Force 1996-97.

Bob and Letty both have taken an active role in supporting the purchase of land to support the La Puente Wildlife Corridor (Whittier Hills).

***Mark Hagan*** - Installed as a Vice President, Mark Hagan is currently working as a Natural Resource Manager for the US Air Force at Edwards Air Force Base. A resident of Lancaster, he has a degree in wildlife management from Humboldt State University.

As the Natural Resource Manager of the 300,000 acre base at Edwards, he is responsible for numerous programs that include endangered species, education and outdoor recreation, fish and wildlife management, research on flora and fauna, pest management, soils, wetlands, and flood plains.

He has been actively involved in the Mojave Desert Ecosystem Initiative, which is a joint Department of Defense and Department of the Interior program and received the *Hammer Award* for his contributions.

Mark is currently the Vice President of the National Military Fish and Wildlife Association and served as Secretary/Treasurer for 2 years.

Serving as the Committee's liaison to the Bureau of Land Management - Ridgecrest Resource Area Office, Mark will coordinate matters pertaining to the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and the Pilot Knob allotment.

## **HELP WANTED**

Our products committee chair is looking for volunteer assistance in marketing the Committee's fundraising items.

In particular, she is interested in talking with anyone who would like to market our beautiful watercolor reproduction poster, "Desert Tortoise with Wildflowers".

Interested? Contact Susan Moore at (760) 377-3466

## **CNN VISITS DESERT TORTOISE RESEARCH NATURAL AREA**

On April 21, Jim Hill of CNN brought two camera men to the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area interpretive center to film desert tortoises and learn about our 1997 research project and three square mile study plot. The cool and overcast weather in the early morning was somewhat worrisome. However, within a few hours the clouds dissipated, the sun was shining, and the tortoises were out in force to greet the camera men. Members of the field research team (Laura Stockton, Tim Shields, Bob Parker, Bev Steveson, Marc Sazaki, Chuck Hemingway) and the Naturalist, Ken Holmes, had identified locations of tortoises the previous night, so we were easily able to observe different sizes and sexes walking, foraging, eating, and resting. Bob Brooks, our President, was on film commenting about the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, and Kristin Berry also spoke about the research project. Tim Shields was filmed processing tortoises (photographing them, color typing them with Munsell colors, and taking measurements). The prize find of the day was a very small juvenile, only 56 millimeters in carapace length. Laura Stockton found this treasure (now, tortoise number 1200) near the kiosk and it cooperated for the camera. Tortoises walked and fed, traveling right up to the camera lenses and into the shade provided by the camera men. The camera folks were provided with spectacular footage, which was shown on TV the following day. Doran Sanchez of the Bureau of Land Management's California Desert District office in Riverside helped to make the arrangements and was also featured in the footage, as was Naturalist Ken Holmes. We hope to obtain copies of the film (just a few minutes in length) for the Committee.

**by Kristin Berry**

