

Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Spring 1998, 18:1

ANNUAL REPORT

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee has functioned as an all-volunteer organization with assistance from consultants for special projects, for more than twenty years. This volunteer tradition continues with an expanded and active board of directors working in conjunction with dedicated members.

To be effective in addressing the significantly broader scope and complexity of the issues that the DTPC faces, the Board worked hard to identify organizational capacity and needs in 1997. Ultimately, the Committee was successful in hiring a part-time Executive Director, Jim Anderson, and opened an administrative office in Riverside, California in December.

Over the past five years, the Board has worked closely with Jun Lee and his firm, Nonprofit Counsel, Inc., in developing innovative approaches to further the Committee's core mission. Although the emphasis of activities shift among priorities from year to year, the primary focal points of Nonprofit Counsel involve land acquisition, environmental education, special public/private partnerships, and continuing board and membership development. "In 1997, the DTPC has made significant gains toward establishing dedicated long-term endowment funding -- through mitigation fees -- which may be used for creative management at both the Desert Tortoise Research and Natural Area and at Pilot Knob," reported Jun Lee.

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee

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Land Acquisition

The DTPC is grateful for receiving land donations valued at approximately \$60,000 in 1997. Two donors contributed 65 acres of non-desert tortoise habitat to the DTPC located in both Kern and San Bernardino counties. Special gratitude to Mr. Brian King of Clinton, Illinois who donated 50 acres located in Kern County California and valued at approximately \$50,000. In addition, the DTPC received 15 acres located in San Bernardino, California and valued at approximately \$10,000 from the Monthaven/Gansen families of San Pedro, California. The Monthaven's and Gansen's inherited these properties from their parents who apparently were

donors to the DTPC but not members. Interestingly, this latter donation was made possible through initial contact to Mike Connor, the Editor of the California Turtle and Tortoise Club's website.

Additionally, the DTPC has been actively negotiating several mitigation agreements with federal and state agencies and private project proponents in order to convert the DTPC's land holdings into liquid cash assets which would enable further land acquisition and more active management at the Natural Area and Pilot Knob. This past year, the DTPC has substantially completed negotiations covering 720 acres of desert tortoise habitat slated for additional conservation measures and involving over a half million dollars for management expenses. We are finalizing five major agreements, but it is important to keep in mind that all of these funds are 'designated' for special purposes so the DTPC must continue a responsible course of generating membership and other charitable donations.

The DTPC's acquisition of 57.81 acres within the Natural Area is a recent example of the use of mitigation funds. Through the California Energy Commission, the DTPC has been maintaining a trust account on behalf of the Mojave Cogeneration Company. After several years of accumulating interest income, the DTPC finalized its trust fund obligations by purchasing key inholdings within the DTRNA and underwriting a special stewardship and research project at the DTRNA study plots under the direction of the DTPC's Vice President Laura Stockton.

Environmental Education

Continuing a long-standing tradition of creative approaches to environmental education, the DTPC sponsored a 2-day conference involving over 20 public and private sector participants from the DTPC, West Mojave Coordinated Management Plan and Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert Plan. The conference, held in Victorville, California from September 17th to the 18th, sought to familiarize key stakeholders in environmental mediation techniques and to make constructive recommendations on improving the planning processes for the two management frameworks. The conference was funded with a generous grant from the ARCO Foundation.

We are now in the second full year of the Nexus 2000: Mojave Desert Educational Outreach Campaign. The DTPC has enjoyed significant financial support from its membership and affiliated organizations such as the California Turtle and Tortoise Club and thus far received in donations and pledges \$95,000 toward the total \$3 million capital budget. In spite of the gratifying internal support received from our supporters, the DTPC is still attempting to secure its selected site at the Zzyzx Road off ramp of Interstate 15.

Two major challenges include coordination with the National Park Service's new East Mojave Desert National Preserve and negotiations with the commercial interests in Baker, California who are located about 3 miles north of the Zzyzx Road site. "We've been winning all the battles, but seem to be losing the war," Jun Lee said regretfully. To avoid tying the future of the DTPC's educational campaign to political and administrative decisions, the DTPC has adopted a new strategy to implement a Mojave Desert - wide implementation of the capital campaign.

The central mission of the campaign is clearly to maximize our reach to as many people as possible, who utilize the desert, with our conservation message. Our initial master plan called for a central 'hub' at Zzyzx Road and later development of regional 'spokes.' Considering the uncertainty of our preferred site at Zzyzx Road, we are now aggressively developing the regional 'spokes' first with a view toward creating a critical mass, which will culminate in the development of a central hub at Zzyzx Road. The 'spokes' will consist of several multi-media interpretive kiosks located throughout the Mojave Desert operating under a central theme. Over time, we will develop name recognition among the public and important visitor information that will enable us to finalize this campaign at Zzyzx Road. It's important to move forward and achieve incremental, tangible results.

Public/Private Ventures

A continuing major priority for the DTPC is to complete installation of 11.2 linear miles of desert tortoise-proof fencing along Harper Lake Road in San Bernardino County pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding with the California Energy Commission, federal and state agencies, and the operators of the solar energy plant in the Harper Dry Lake area. By the end of 1997, the DTPC successfully completed its Phase I plan to acquire easements/rights of way and construct fencing along 52% of the total project area. It is expected that Phase II construction to complete the project will commence by April or May of 1998.

Stewardship

Research and Monitoring of Tortoises and Habitat at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area - Vice President Laura Stockton took a year's sabbatical leave beginning in the fall of 1996 enabling the Committee to undertake a massive field project in late winter and spring of 1997 at the Natural Area's Interpretive Center. The project focused on work that Dr. Kristin Berry initiated in 1979 with the Bureau of Land Management of a large study plot, with the Interpretive Center approximately at the center. The project had continued successfully with surveys in 1979, 1985, 1989, and 1993. Because no funds were available from the Department of the Interior for the 1997 survey, we were able to successfully undertake and complete the survey with a large team of experts and volunteers because Laura volunteered to be Field Team Leader and worked unpaid, full time on the project for several months.

The survey plot has two parts, that inside the fence (1.75 sq. miles) and that immediately adjacent to the fence (1.25 sq. miles). Fieldwork involved completing two surveys of the plot within a 60-day period in spring, when tortoises were most likely to be above ground. In analyzing the data, Dr. Berry compared results of previous surveys with the 1997 data sets. Overall, declines in tortoise numbers are continuing (from 593 individuals in 1979 to 77 in 1997). Between 1979 and 1997, densities of all sizes of tortoises have declined 90% inside the fence and 93% outside the fence. For adults, the declines have been 86% inside the fence and 94% outside the fence. Overall, more tortoises are found inside than outside the fence. Fewer tortoises were observed with moderate to severe signs of upper respiratory tract disease than in 1989 and 1993; all appeared active, robust, and in good flesh. This is an important and positive sign. With 18 years of data, we have learned that existing management practices are effective in protecting habitat but are not effective in protecting individual tortoises or populations. We need

to collectively seek ways to secure the boundaries of the Natural Area, reduce losses of tortoises from many sources, and manage predation by ravens. Dr. Berry is preparing a manuscript to summarize the 18 years of change.

Pilot Knob Summary for 1997

Visitation - Fifty-two person-day visits to Blackwater Well and Pilot Knob Allotment area were made during 1997. Bureau of Land Management and DTPC volunteer, Sterling Kendrick, patrolled the area on 20 days for a total of 150 person hours. Sterling Kendrick was assisted on several occasions by Randsburg residents, Richard Olson and Jim Bills, helping with minor repairs around the ranch cabin and stabilizing the windmill at Blackwater Well. Olson and Bills also accompanied Board member, Karen Spangenberg, on a driving tour of Pilot Knob Allotment to locate and inspect range improvements. Various members of the Board of Trustees visited Blackwater Well in June to familiarize themselves with the Blackwater Well ranch area and in November to inspect water sites on the Naval Weapons Center (NWC). Highlights of the visits to the area included ongoing maintenance of the fence and signs surrounding the ranch cabin; cleanup of the ranch cabin and shed area; repair of the outhouse; securing the ranch cabin; commencing photo monitoring; winterizing pipelines and faucets; and lastly, the observation of a bobcat at Blackwater Well. Many thanks are due volunteers, especially Sterling Kendrick, for the generous contribution of their time.

Photo Monitoring - Long-term photo monitoring of Pilot Knob Allotment began during 1997. Photo monitoring locations were selected to include not only examples of the different habitat and three plant communities found at Pilot Knob, but also the 24 range improvements acquired with the purchase of the allotment. Range improvements include structures (ranch buildings and windmill at Blackwater Well), outlying water developments (tanks, troughs, and haul sites), and containment structures (fences, gates, and cattle guards). Most range improvements were visited and photographed during 1997.

Water Rights - The water license for Rock Corral Spring (a.k.a. Stone Corral Spring) was transferred to the ownership of The Wildlands Conservancy and the DTPC with the California State Water Rights Board, Department of Water Resources. The spring is located in an isolated canyon on China Lake Naval Weapons Center (NWC) east of Pilot Knob Allotment. In addition to surface water ownership, the DTPC also owns range improvements associated with water developments at Pilot Knob Wells #1 and #2, also in NWC. Unlike surface (spring) water rights, these wells were drilled and developed under permit by the Bureau of Land Management and transferred to DTPC and The Wildlands Conservancy ownership with the 1995 purchase. In early November, several DTPC Board of Trustee members, volunteer Sterling Kendrick and friends were accompanied to these water sites by Tom Campbell and Susan Williams of the NWC Environmental Projects Office. Visitation and access to these water sites is limited by the need for Navy escort while on NWC. For future access to these sites, additional contacts with NWC need to be cultivated for access to maintain these water developments.

The Year Ahead - Starting in January, new Host/Interpreters, Jim Bills and Richard Olson will be on site at Blackwater Well throughout spring and early summer for maintenance around Blackwater Well and to interface with the visiting public. A work party is planned to remove

debris (old refrigerator, hot water heater and miscellaneous household items, etc.) in the vicinity of Blackwater Well. A proposal is pending with the California Energy Commission and the Mojave Water Agency to convey a conservation easement deed to the California Department of Fish and Game for a portion of the private property within Pilot Knob Allotment. The monies from the proposed conveyance will be used to establish an endowment for the short-term habitat enhancement and long-term management of the Pilot Knob Allotment area.

FEATURING VOLUNTEERS

Anna Martyn Anna became the clip art artist for the newsletter two editions back. She graciously donated a group of sketches of desert subjects she had created for another project to Tortoise Tracks beginning with the fall '97 edition. A DTPC supporter for many years, Anna is Curator of Natural History at the Maturango Museum in Ridgecrest, CA and is a taxidermist as well as a talented artist. She created and maintains the natural history display boxes utilized at the Discovery Center and has prepared several tortoise shells for the Committee's use. She also assists with special tours on the DTNA. The Tortoise Tracks editor wants to especially thank Anna for her volunteerism in the expectation that she might find time to create some more of those wonderful line drawings just for the newsletter.

Thank you Anna!

GRANT APPLICATION

Last fall, Marc Sazaki of the California Energy Commission announced that a grant opportunity would become available for selected research and monitoring projects on the Mohave ground squirrel and desert tortoise. A team composed of Dr. Kristin Berry, Dr. Phil Leitner (an expert on the Mohave ground squirrel) and Matt Brooks was formed to develop a grant package specifically for the squirrel. Hopefully the Committee will receive a grant and have the opportunity to address critical questions for management of the species in the Western Mojave Desert in general and at the Natural Area and Pilot Knob specifically.

PUBLICATIONS

Several recently published papers will be available for the Naturalist to distribute at the Interpretive Center this spring. Included will be copies of papers published in 1997 as part of the proceedings of an international conference on the conservation and management of turtles and tortoises. Authors with familiar names include: David J. Morafka, E. Karen Spangenberg, Kristin Berry, and W. Bryan Jennings.

Dr. Joan Schneider's booklet, *The Desert Tortoise and Early Peoples of the Western Deserts*, continues to be in demand and we plan to print more copies in 1998. Parks and government agencies have requested copies. Both the California Turtle and Tortoise Club and the Long Island Herpetological Society have distributed over 3,000 copies.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR SPRING WORK PARTY AT DTNA

Saturday, March 14 has been set for this spring's work party at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. We will focus on getting the Interpretive Center kiosk, parking area, trails and the Randsburg-Mojave Road leading to the Natural Area spruced up for the many visitors we expect will be coming to see an abundance of wildflowers and active tortoises this spring.

To RSVP or for more information contact Laura Stockton at: (805) 831-2325 or lstockton@lightspeed.net

BOARD OF TRUSTEES UPDATES

Jim Anderson Resigns - Jim Anderson, who joined the Board last year, resigned to accept the DTPC's Executive Director position. Jim is now working, on a part time basis, out of our new administrative office in Riverside.

Rae Packard Joins Board - Ms. Packard joined the Board at the Annual Meeting in January. She had made a presentation at a prior board meeting regarding her work with Joshua Tree Tortoise Rescue, headquartered in Yucca Valley, California and had solicited the DTPC's support in pursuing grant monies for a multi-agency educational unit, perhaps in the form of a trailer that could be used to augment the Committee's own educational outreach efforts.

Rae is the Director of Joshua Tree Tortoise Rescue, a facility dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation, and adoption of sick, injured, and environmentally-displaced desert tortoises. The Rescue also conducts intensive education programs regarding the dangers of the release of captive tortoises into wild populations, and the special care needed for tortoises that are adopted. It has been in operation for over two years and works closely with the Joshua Tree National Park, the 29 Palms Marine Base, Animal Control, the Hi-Desert Nature Museum, the Living Desert, local government agencies, community service organizations, pet shops and veterinarians. The Rescue is a chapter of the California Turtle and Tortoise Club (CTTC). Rae is chairperson for CTTC's educational outreach committee.

Though a biology major at California State University, San Bernardino, Rae's background is in marketing and computer graphics, having owned her own successful business in San Diego for over seven years. She volunteers at the Coachella Valley Wild Bird Center and the Joshua Tree National Park as an interpretive ranger in the birding and tortoise programs. Rae is also a graduate of the San Diego State University Clown School.

Rae lives in Yucca Valley where she is employed as an office manager for a hospital psychiatric unit. She shares her home with the turtles and tortoises she has adopted, her three dogs, a cat, cockatiel, iguana, snake and bunny.

The Board welcomes Rae's active participation and much needed representation from the East Mojave Desert area.

New Projects - With the advent of the new year, two new projects requiring immediate action became priorities for the Board.

The first was the need to immediately involve DTPC in negotiations with the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) for tortoise impact mitigations related to the building of a prison in California City. The prison will be located approximately two miles from the DTNA on 70 acres in a 320 acre plot of private land and will employ 600 people. After a two hour presentation at the December board meeting by Dr. Larry Adams, the Mayor of California City and Mr. Jack Stewart of the California City Economic Development Corporation (CCEDC), the Board formed a committee chaired by Vice President, Mark Hagan to contact CCA directly and begin negotiations in cooperation with California City, the California Department of Fish and Game, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and other interested parties. The existence of CCA's proposal and Draft Supplement Environmental Impact Report only came to the Board's attention in mid-December, well after the comment period was over on October 24, 1997. A negotiating meeting was held with CCA and California City representatives concurrent with the board meeting on January 10 in Victorville. DTPC's goal is to develop a long-term stewardship and management program, in cooperation with CCA and California City, to identify and deal with known and potential critical issues that the prison's existence could contribute to the decline and loss of desert tortoise populations.

The second new project was to immediately determine the need to appeal the Bureau of Land Management's decision to allow 7 new grazing allotments on public lands. A committee was formed with President, Bob Brooks as chairperson to first ask for an extension to respond to the proposed grazing decisions (which came to the Board's attention only a few days before a response was due) and then to review each to see where any critical habitat might exist.

Special Projects - The Committee has been offered volunteer assistance in developing a WEB page. Karen Spangenberg, Laura Stockton, and Dr. Berry sought out and reviewed available materials to include techniques for displaying information, and methods for easy use and referral to other sites. The Board is hoping to finalize a WEB site and home page in the coming months with the assistance of our new Executive Director.

AWARDS PRESENTATIONS AT ANNUAL BANQUET

Twelve individuals were accorded special recognition for their service to preservation of the desert tortoise and its habitat and for their volunteerism at the DTPC's Annual Banquet in Victorville on January 10.

Ed LaRue - Presented a photo plaque for his service above and beyond his prior DTPC Board membership, Ed was recognized for his work for the Desert Tortoise Council's recommendations for The Ord Mountain Pilot Study - Route Designation Review and his workshops on how to work with desert tortoises in the field.

Certificates of Appreciation went to:

Alan Dale for his ongoing assistance to the Committee with membership records and responsibility for our post office box and mail triage.

Glenn Goodlett for taking care of the Discovery Center motor home above and beyond his duties as Naturalist Contractor.

Wanda Deal for behind the scenes support of Board functions and for being instrumental in locating a fence contractor for the Harper Lake Road fence.

Sterling Kendrick for monitoring and maintenance at Pilot Knob/Blackwater Well.

Certificates of Appreciation were also presented to the following volunteers and agency biologists who helped complete the DTNA field survey from February through June of 1997: Dan Christenson (30 days), Kevin Emmerich (5 days), Chuck Hemmingway (20 days), Frank Hoover (16 days), Bob Parker (16 days), Marc Sazaki (10 days), and Joyce Schlachter (14 days).

A "day" to these dedicated people usually consisted of far more than just 8 hours.

DTPC OFFICE OPENED IN RIVERSIDE

The Board and our Executive Director, Jim Anderson, are very excited to announce that the DTPC administrative office is now open. Jim worked very hard in November and December to prepare the office in time for the Board's December 13 meeting. This permanent office will provide a central location for project and archival files, improve liaison with project partners, provide public accessibility to the DTPC, and provide a place for board meetings. The office is located in the redevelopment area of downtown Riverside in a 20's era court converted into offices for non-profit organizations similar to our own. Initially the office will be staffed only on a part time basis, so be sure to call ahead if you plan to be in the area and would like to come by and say hello or would like to attend a board meeting. Call for board meeting dates and times.

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You can also contact the Board members, Jim Anderson and the Tortoise Tracks editor via our new e-mail address at dtpc@pacbell.net. Get involved, come to a board meeting.

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