



Tortoise Tracks



Volunteers Clean up During DTPC's Annual Fall Work Party

Article by: Mosheh Wolf



Early in the morning, Saturday, October 25th, seventeen volunteers reported for “duty” at the [Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area](#) (DTRNA) for the DTPC’s annual Fall Work Party. The weather was perfect for it, not too hot, and not too cold. After introductions, a brief orientation, and discussion of the day’s work plans (and some coffee – Thank you, Craig!) the volunteers got into the more rugged of the vehicles and caravanned to the our main work site, Section 13, a square mile of land just inside the eastern boundary of the DTRNA, that volunteers recognized from the previous Work Party. On arrival, the volunteers picked up their cleaning implements and proceeded to remove garbage and debris left from camping, dumping, and target shooting, mementos of the lack of care by previous owners.

Chuck Hemingway and **David Zantany** drove off to continue putting up signs, while the rest of the volunteers proceeded to pick up glass, the remains of clay pigeons, bullet shells, and other such small pieces of trash. This work is tedious, but the volunteers persevered, and were rewarded by the site of clean hillsides, looking much more natural and wildlife-friendly. The volunteers also removed a number of old fire pits.

At the end of a long and tiring day the volunteers were treated to a barbeque, thanks to the cooking skills of **Craig Bansmere** and **David Logan**. They sat around and watched the night descend on the DTRNA while enjoying good food and better company.



Thank you to all of our incredible volunteers: **Bonny Ahern**, **Craig Bansmere**, **Franklin Bedard**, **Mark Bratton**, **William Candish**, **Kolene Dearmore**, **Allen Eggleton**, **Nick Garside**, **Chuck Hemingway**, **Tim Kirkpatrick**, **John Krafczyk**, **Lucas Langendoer**, **Will Leibscher**, **Mary Logan**, **David Logan**, **Joshua Rickard**, **Rachel Woodard**, and **David Zantany**. Thank you also to **Bonny Ahern** and **Craig Bansmer** who did much of the Work Party planning and paperwork (Craig also took me on the pre work party scouting trip).

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee
Invites You to Join Us At Our
40th Annual Banquet and General Meeting
January 24, 2015

The DTPC's Annual Meeting and Banquet will be held Saturday, January 24, 2015 at **The Elks Club, 2705 E Avenue Q, Palmdale, California 93550** (661-947-2027). The afternoon Annual Meeting will feature a review of the Committee's ongoing programs and activities and plans for 2015. Speakers from a variety of agencies will give updates on important activities throughout southern California. The banquet speaker will be **Dr. Brian Cypher** and the program title is ***Desert Tortoises and Desert Canids: Coexistence and Conflicts.***

PROGRAM

- **Annual Meeting** **2:30 to 4:30 P.M.**
- **Social Mixer** **5:00 to 6:00 P.M.**
- **Banquet** **6:00 to 9:00 P.M.**

To RSVP or For Additional Information Contact:

Mosheh Wolf (951) 683-3872 or Email: mosheh.wolf@tortoise-tracks.org

\$ _____ **Dinner Reservation \$45.00**
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Desert Tortoises and Desert Canids: Coexistence and Conflicts

**Biographical Information for Dr. Brian Cypher
Guest Speaker at the DTPC 40th Annual Banquet**

Brian Cypher is the Associate Director and a Research Ecologist with the California State University – Stanislaus, Endangered Species Recovery Program. He is based in Bakersfield where he coordinates the efforts of a small team of biologists. Since 1990, he has been involved in research and conservation efforts for endangered and other sensitive species, primarily in the San Joaquin Valley of California. His primary research interest is the ecology and conservation of wild canids, with a special emphasis on San Joaquin kit foxes. Other species he currently is working with include coyotes, desert kit foxes, island foxes, several endangered kangaroo rats, San Joaquin antelope squirrels, Buena Vista Lake shrews, blunt-nosed leopard lizards, and Bakersfield cactus.

DTPC Calendar of Events

January 24, 2015: DTPC 40th Annual Banquet and General Meeting, The Elks Club, Palmdale, CA

The DTPC would like to thank the following volunteers:

<i>Bonny Ahern</i>	<i>Allen Eggleton</i>	<i>Greg Lathrop</i>	<i>Bob Wood</i>
<i>Craig Bansmer</i>	<i>Nick Garside</i>	<i>Will Liebscher</i>	<i>Rachel Woodard</i>
<i>Franklin Bedard</i>	<i>Chuck Hemingway</i>	<i>Jun Lee</i>	<i>Dave Zantiny</i>
<i>Ron Berger</i>	<i>Marlene Ishii</i>	<i>David Logan</i>	
<i>Dr. Kristin Berry</i>	<i>Steve Ishii</i>	<i>Mary Logan</i>	
<i>Mark Bratton</i>	<i>Tim Kirkpatrick</i>	<i>Freya Reder</i>	
<i>William Candish</i>	<i>John Krafczyk</i>	<i>Joshua Rickard</i>	
<i>Kolene Dearmore</i>	<i>Lucas Langendoer</i>	<i>Laura Stockton</i>	

For more information call (951) 683-3872 or send an email to mosheh.wolf@tortoise-tracks.org, or check out the DTPC's website www.tortoise-tracks.org and Facebook page www.facebook.com/dtpc.inc.



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From KCET

Study: Grazing, Vehicles Bad For Desert Tortoises

Chris Clarke, December 1, 2014

A new study of desert tortoise populations in the western Mojave Desert shows that the reptiles fare better when they're protected from off-road vehicles and grazing livestock. The study, with veteran U.S. Geological Survey tortoise biologist Kristin Berry as lead author, shows that tortoises in an area where neither vehicles nor livestock have been permitted thrive in greater numbers, and with lower death rates, than their counterparts in unprotected areas.

That may seem like a bit of a no-brainer, but the issue of livestock grazing and tortoises achieved national prominence earlier this year, when Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy hit the news for resisting confiscation of about 900 cattle he was grazing illegally on critical habitat for the tortoise in southern Nevada. Supporters of the rancher suggested that cattle actually benefit desert tortoises by processing desert plants into an easier-to-digest form -- in other words, suggesting that torts thrive on a diet of cow flops.

Few herpetologists take that idea seriously, and now Berry *et al's* study adds more data to the pile, supporting the idea that the best way to protect tortoises is to leave their habitat intact and protected.

In the study, published in the December 2014 issue of Herpetological Monographs, Berry and her USGS colleagues Lisa Lyren, and Julie Yee, along with Tracy Bailey of the Desert Tortoise Council, studied 240 plots of about an acre and a half each in the western Mojave Desert between the town of Mojave and city of Ridgecrest. A third of the study sites were in the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area northeast of California City, which has been fenced off and thus protected from livestock and vehicle traffic since 1980.

Another third were in critical habitat for the tortoise in the same region. Since critical habitat for the federally Threatened tortoise was designated in 1994, parts of the critical habitat area studied by Berry and her colleagues have periodically been closed to vehicle traffic and grazing. However, that protection has been temporary and incomplete, and the land in question has also been grazed by domestic sheep and used as the site of off-road events with more than 10,000 vehicles participating.

The final third of the study plots were on private land in the California City-Randsburg area that have not been protected from vehicles, grazing, or other uses potentially detrimental to the tortoise.

On all 240 plots the team counted live tortoises they encountered, as well as tortoise sign (mainly burrows and scat) and remains of dead tortoises. They also tallied evidence of human activity such as tire tracks, sheep dung and other evidence of grazing, lead shot or other and trash, as well as evidence of ravens and mammalian predators of tortoises.

The results showed a distinct difference between the long-protected habitat in the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area and either the critical habitat or unprotected private lands. Twelve of the 17 live tortoises found on all 240 study plots were found within the Natural Area, with two on critical habitat plots and three on private lands. The fully protected area had a fewer dead tortoises for each live one than the critical habitat area, with 22 remains of tortoises in the protected sites (1.8 dead tortoises per live tortoise) compared to 23 dead tortoises on the critical habitat sites, which works out to almost 12 dead tortoises for each live one.

The authors suggest that both sheep grazing and off-road vehicle use may harm tortoise populations not only directly through trampling tortoises and collapsing burrows, but by reducing the amount of seasonal food available to the tortoises. Off-road vehicles do so by crushing plants before they can set seed, changing soil structure and introducing exotic grasses and herbs that compete with native vegetation but provide less nutritive value to the tortoises. Sheep do all of the above as well, and they also eat those valuable tortoise food plants, which means the tortoises can't.

From U-T San Diego OCT. 30, 2014

<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/oct/30/environment-desert-protection-act-anniversary/>

Desert act turns 20, what it saved

San Diego resident Nick Ervin, a key activist in the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, recalls efforts to save the desert on the act's 20th anniversary.

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan

Twenty years ago today, the California Desert Protection Act designated 7.6 million acres of the state's back-country as wilderness.

Portions of that land had been mined, grazed and used illegally for off-roading.

For desert lovers such as Nick Ervin of San Diego, California's deserts represented a wide-open expanse of solitude and stillness, just hours from the state's biggest cities. After surveying what he saw as damage to them from human activities, he found a chance for restoration.

Ervin joined fellow Sierra Club activists to spearhead San Diego County support for the Desert Protection Act, first introduced by Sen. Alan Cranston and then shepherded through Congress by Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

The legislation established the 1.6 million-acre Mojave National Preserve and designated Death Valley and Joshua Tree as national parks. It also set aside as wilderness smaller tracts in San Diego and Imperial counties, including the Fish Creek, Coyote and Sawtooth mountains near Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

The bill faced opposition from people who feared it would engulf private land, ban visitors from wilderness areas and forbid popular activities such as hunting and off-roading. The debate escalated into scuffles at times, Ervin remembered.

In the end, the law didn't secure the pure, unaltered wilderness that some proponents sought. Certain mining and grazing operations were grandfathered in, and hunting continues in the Mojave National Preserve.

Motor vehicles aren't allowed in wilderness zones. But adjoining land and some roads that traverse the protected acreage are still open to traffic that includes off-road vehicles, said Paul Turcke, an attorney who has represented off-road enthusiasts nationwide. Litigation over the desert access remains to this day, he said.

The legislation became law on Oct. 31, 1994, when then-President Bill Clinton gave it his signature. For the 20th anniversary milestone, Ervin, a retired psychotherapist who now teaches at National University, talked with U-T San Diego about his efforts to preserve the state's open spaces. Here is an edited version of that discussion:

Question: How did you get involved in the campaign to pass the California Desert Protection Act?

Answer: I was active in the local chapter of the Sierra Club in the late '70s early '80s. ... Some big conservation activists in Los Angeles gathered information and then approached Sen. Alan Cranston about sponsoring a bill in Congress to rectify the big problems with how the desert was being run over by off-road vehicles, reckless mining, reckless grazing and uncontrolled urban development around desert cities. They said we need organizers in San Diego and Imperial counties.

Question: What was your particular role?

Answer: I and two other organizers ... followed the bill from 1988 to 1994. We wrote articles, we did letter-writing campaigns. I did old-fashioned slide shows — it wasn't PowerPoint in those days. I did garden clubs, classroom presentations. We wrote op-eds.

Question: What were the challenges to securing support for desert protection?

Answer: There was a belief that it's an empty waste, where there's not much life. Or it's a fearful place with rattlesnakes and scorpions. It's a harder sell to the general public than forests or lakes.

Question: Why did you believe the cause was important?

(Continued on page 7)

From the Yuma Sun

Team tracks tortoise habitat at YPG

Posted: Sunday, November 16, 2014 1:00 am | Updated: 10:34 am, Tue Nov 18, 2014.

By Mark Schauer, The (YPG) Outpost

With November here, the Yuma Proving Ground's population of Sonoran Desert Tortoises are preparing for brumation, the reptilian equivalent to hibernation.

Humans responsible for their stewardship, however, are celebrating a year of discovery about the desert creatures.

"We learned more this season about tortoises in this region than has ever been known," said Daniel Steward, YPG wildlife biologist.

To facilitate YPG's important mission while at the same time conserving the proving ground's wildlife population, wildlife biologists have actively sought to determine where populations of desert tortoises live, searching for the creatures in plots of land most likely to have them present. Steward says that, unlike the Mojave Tortoise, which isn't found at YPG, Sonoran Tortoises prefer rocky areas with lots of shelter sites.

"Most of the tortoise activity is up on the mountains where YPG conducts less activity," said Steward. "That reduces a great deal of conflict with our mission because most activities are down in the flats."

Sonoran Desert Tortoises spend most of their lives in underground burrows. They can survive for more than one year without water, getting most of their liquids from the plants they eat. They are most active in the periods that immediately follow monsoons.

"Tortoises have a slow metabolism and are well adapted to this environment, so they only have to drink a few times a year," said Steward. "They can store water in their bladder. One of the risks of people handling tortoises is that they will urinate, and when they urinate they are giving up vital water resources."

To track the tortoises and study their habits, biologists attach small VHF transmitters and GPS data loggers to the shell of each tortoise they find. They also paint a unique number on the tortoise's shell, and file a small notch through one of the keratin scutes at the thin rear edge of the shell, which has a consistency similar to a human fingernail. All this is done after an examination of the tortoise's health and weight.

Coaxing one of the creatures out of their shelters can be a challenge: if they feel threatened, they oftentimes wedge

themselves against the rear wall and ceiling of their miniature caves, which can be yards deep.

"They're shockingly strong," said Hillary Hoffman, a herpetologist with the Arizona Game and Fish Department who has been coming to YPG since 2009. "If they don't want to come out, they're not coming out."

Once the data loggers are attached, biologists seek the tortoises out with an antenna to track the transmitters. To reduce the weight of each data logger to avoid hurting the tortoise, batteries must be changed on a monthly basis, at which time the biologists retrieve stored data.

"That data can then be used to look at how far these tortoises travel from their shelter sites," said Steward. "Plus, a lot of times when you are following a tortoise in a good area with lots of shelter sites, it will guide you to other tortoises."

So far this season, the biologists have found 20 tortoises, a dramatic and unexpected increase over the two they found in the last study three years ago. Steward thinks the selection of study plots helped the effort.

"It's always been thought that overall population densities out here were low," said Hoffman. "Perhaps there are pockets of high density, but range-wide the habitat is just not appropriate. It's a dry, dry, dry part of the state."

There have been persistent rumors in recent years that the Sonoran Tortoise could be added to the federal government's Endangered Species List. According to Steward, this possibility should not interfere with YPG's longstanding mission if it occurred.

"The Endangered Species Act is a process-driven law," said Steward. "It wouldn't affect what we do; it would affect our planning process. In any wildlife conservation activity, first you want to avoid impact, then minimize impact, lastly you mitigate impact. This research gives us the information we need to be able to assess future impacts on this species and allows us to better support YPG's mission while ensuring tortoise conservation.

With YPG's efforts to conserve tortoise and the inter-agency cooperation, Steward is hopeful the tortoise will not be federally listed. In the meantime, the search and tracking effort continues.

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Question: Why did you believe the cause was important?

Answer: I had been hiking in the desert for years and years, and had seen how outside of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, there were lots and lots of off-road activities. ... Desert foliage is very slow to heal and very fragile. You can do hundreds of years' worth of damage in an afternoon with an off-road vehicle that is poorly used.

Question: What does the act mean for San Diegans?

Answer: It means that a lot of the desert lands around Anza-Borrego park have the highest official protection status that you can give any land in perpetuity. It would require an act of Congress to reverse the Desert Protection Act.

Question: What were your responses to critics who said the law imposes restrictions on too much land?

Answer: There were meetings in the late '80s that were big-time contentions. There was actually some pushing and shoving going on. ... I personally got hate mail. They were typically centered around one accusation that we were locking up desert land against the average citizen. ... The old stereotype was we were watermelons — green on the outside and red on the inside. People said it was a communist plot, socialism in action in the California desert.

Question: What were the eventual accommodations for existing uses such as wildlife management, hunting and grazing?

Answer: One of the big concessions was the Mojave National Preserve (instead of it becoming a national park). There were several concessions that hunting would permanently allowed. ... Back then, there were people doing grazing on federal lands under a lease, who were really afraid of losing their grazing rights. Dianne Feinstein said we will never force you to sell (grazing rights). That was a pretty big concession. There's always been a big debate about guzzlers (artificial water sources built to aid wildlife). The Desert Protection Act doesn't really address what guzzlers should be allowed and where. And that debate goes on.

Question: What do you think about the status of the California desert today and the role of energy developments such as solar and wind farms?

Answer: As preservationists we've been torn, because as preservationists we support renewable energy. But some of us on the desert land (issue) object to some of these developments because the government is sometimes allowing them on lands that are not already burned out agricultural lands, or toxic waste sites and brownfields. They've allowed some of these developments on pristine, high-quality desert habitat and not next to existing power lines. ... We're also arguing for more rooftop development in cities, where the energy is used. Renewable energy and where it's to be sited is the argument for decades ahead.

(Continued from page 6)

“Everything is bigger out West – Yuma Proving Ground is a monstrous range that is bigger than the state of Rhode Island,” said Steward with a smile. “We have a crew of people trying to determine the population, size and location of a small, subterranean reptile. That’s a pretty big feat.”



Tortoise Tracks

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