

DESERT TORTOISE
(SONORAN POPULATION)
[Gopherus (=Xerobates, =Scaptochelys) agassizii]

STATUS: None; desert tortoises that occur east and south of the Colorado River in Arizona are referred to as the Sonoran population.

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: Large (shell length up to 38 cm (15 in) long), herbivorous reptile with a domed shell and round, elephant-like legs. Growth rings are conspicuous on the shields of both the plastron and the carapace. The carapace is a dull brown or grey color and the plastron is unhinged and often pale yellow in coloration. Sonoran desert tortoises generally have a flatter carapace than tortoises in the Mohave population. Forelimbs are covered with large, conical scales and the tail is short. Males can be distinguished when sexual maturity is reached by a concave plastron, gular shields that protrude forward from front of plastron, and larger chin glands. Sonoran desert tortoises are surface-active in spring months and again during the monsoon; separated by periods of dormancy in the winter and mid-summer months.

HABITAT: The Sonoran population of desert tortoise prefers different habitat than the Mohave population. Preferred habitat for Sonoran desert tortoises is primarily rocky (often steep) hillsides and bajadas of Mohave and Sonoran deserts but may encroach into desert grassland, juniper woodland, interior chaparral habitats, and even pine communities. Washes and valley bottoms may be used in dispersal. Tortoises of the Sonoran population are found from approximately 1,000 feet to 7,800 feet in elevation.

RANGE: Historical: Occurs in preferred habitats south and east of the Colorado River in Arizona in Maricopa, Mohave, Yuma, La Paz, Gila, Pinal, Pima, Graham, Santa Cruz, and Cochise counties to south of the International Border.

Current: It is still distributed throughout the historical range, but populations are becoming increasingly fragmented due to threats to habitat in valley bottoms used for dispersal and exchange of genetic material.

REASONS FOR DECLINE/VULNERABILITY: Threats include loss and degradation of habitat, illegal collection and vandalism, predation by feral dogs and, to a lesser degree, disease (Upper Respiratory Tract Disease, shell disease). Causes of the habitat loss include roads, housing, and energy development; conversion of habitat to agriculture; overgrazing; and off-road vehicle use.

LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP: Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of Defense, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona State Land Department, Arizona State Parks Department, Arizona Game and Fish Department, various county and city lands, and private.

NOTES: A revised State Conservation Strategy and Agreement is being prepared by the Arizona Interagency Desert Tortoise Team comprised of government stakeholders responsible for management of Sonoran desert tortoise on their respective lands.

Listed as Wildlife of Special Concern by the State of Arizona.