

Las Vegas Places its Bets on Habitat Plan

by Randi Thompson



More than 100 people gathered at the Red Rock National Conservation Area near Las Vegas, Nevada, on November 1, 2000, to celebrate the approval of the Clark County Multi Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been working for more than 10 years with a wide array of interests to conserve habitat around Las Vegas for the threatened Mojave population of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). The Desert Conservation Plan this group crafted was signed in 1995. But Clark County soon initiated the MSHCP process to broaden the scope of the conservation plan, addressing the needs of many other sensitive species that could be affected by urban development.

The goal of the 5-million-acre (2-million-hectare) MSHCP is to conserve healthy functioning ecosystems and the species supported by them (see sidebar). It is one of the most far-reaching Habitat Conservation Plans in the nation, covering 78 species, 11 ecosystems, and 145,000 acres (58,000 ha) that are subject to development over the next 30 years.

The committee that developed the MSHCP was composed of federal, state, and local government agencies; environmental groups such as The Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club, and Conservation Fund; university and independent scientists; and resource users such as the Southern Nevada Home Builders Association, Southern Nevada Water Authority, mining and grazing interests, and off-highway vehicle enthusiasts. To meet the goals of the MSHCP, the plan incorporates all lands, both federal and non-federal, in a reserve design. The Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are critical participants in the plan's implementation.

The plan incorporates a science-based adaptive management process that provides a flexible, interactive approach to long-term management of biological resources. Monitoring will be used to evaluate and periodically modify, as necessary, management techniques and specific objectives. The plan will provide an analysis of all land use trends to ensure that take and habitat disturbance are balanced with solid conservation.

Clark County will continue to collect a \$550 per-acre fee established under the original Desert Conservation Plan and will expend those funds, approximately \$2 million a year, on actions to minimize

The Clark County MSHCP area includes all of Clark County, Nevada's most populated county (more than 1.4 million people, or about 70 percent of the state total). The 11 ecosystems it addresses are:

1. Alpine—herbaceous, high-altitude tundra vegetation, generally above timberline; characteristically sparse with low vegetation adapted to winter snowfalls and generally cold temperatures. Provides habitat for 10 covered species.

2. Bristlecone pine—found in Spring and Sheep mountains, ranging in elevation from 9,000 to 11,500 feet (2,740 to 3,500 meters) on exposed, dry, rocky slopes and ridges; comprises evergreen conifer woodland dominated by bristlecone pine. Provides habitat for 24 covered species.

3. Mixed conifer—includes white fir, ponderosa pine, and ponderosa pine/mountain shrub community types; found in Spring and Sheep Mountains on generally north- and east-facing slopes. Provides habitat for 33 covered species.

4. Pinyon-juniper—mountain shrub, pinyon, pinyon-juniper, and juniper community types at elevations ranging from 4,900 to 8,200 feet (1,500 to 2,500 m). Provides habitat for 30 covered species.

5. Sagebrush—sagebrush/perennial grass community types, found in the Spring, Sheep, and Virgin Mountains, typically ranging from 4,900 to 9,200 feet (1,500 to 2,800 m). Provides habitat for 20 covered species.

6. Blackbrush community—typically considered part of the Mojave desert scrub ecosystem but managed at the ecosystem level; occurs on upper bajadas (alluvial fans), slopes, and valleys below 5,900 feet (1,800 m). Provides habitat for 11 covered species.

7. Salt desert scrub—occurs between 3,250 and 5,800 feet (990 and 1,770 m) in a mosaic pattern within stands of creosote-bursage and blackbrush communities. Provides habitat for 16 covered species.

8) Mojave Desert—smallest of the four North American deserts, although most widespread ecosystem in Clark County. Shrublands occur below 4,000 feet (1,220 m) and include two

major plant communities, Mojave mixed scrub and creosote-bursage. Provides habitat for 24 covered species.

9. Mesquite and catclaw community—nested within Mojave desert scrub biogeographically but managed at the ecosystem level, the mesquite and catclaw community provides habitat for 11 covered species.

10. Desert riparian/aquatic—associated with rivers and streams, generally below 4,000 feet; primarily includes Virgin and Muddy rivers, Las Vegas Valley Wash, and Colorado River. Provides habitat for 14 covered species, half of which are water dependent.

11. Perennial springs—Over 500 known springs are widely distributed from high mountains to low deserts; most are cold-water springs and vary from small, isolated pools with short spring-brooks to larger spring-fed rivers such as Muddy River. One covered species is associated with springs.

and mitigate the effects of incidental take on listed species under the MSHCP.

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(Opposite page) Valley of Fire State Park, part of the Clark County MSHCP reserve.

Photo by Carol McKim

(At right) Desert tortoise

Photo by Beth Jackson/USFWS

