



## U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service

### Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office

*Conserving the biological diversity of the Great Basin, Eastern Sierra, and Mojave Desert*

#### **Pet Desert Tortoise Frequently Asked Questions**

##### *Keeping Wild Tortoises Wild*

**Q. Where do Mojave desert tortoises occur?**

**A.** Tortoises have lived in the area that is now the Mojave Desert for millions of years, even before it was a desert. The Mojave desert tortoise occurs north and west of the Colorado River in California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah. As recently as the mid-1900s, people commonly encountered these familiar, gentle creatures. Today, they are rarely seen and in some places they have disappeared entirely.

**Q. Has the number of wild desert tortoises declined?**

**A.** Yes. The Mojave desert tortoise has been protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 1989 and listed as threatened since 1990. Observed population declines across the species' range contributed to the need to list the species under the ESA.

**Q. Can you collect desert tortoises from the wild?**

**A.** No. It is against state and federal law to collect a wild desert tortoise without a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW). All desert tortoises in Nevada, whether in captivity or not, are considered wildlife and therefore belong to the people of the state of Nevada. Individuals who legally possess a desert tortoise are considered custodians, rather than owners of desert tortoises in captivity.

##### *Keeping Captive Tortoises Captive*

**Q. Can you legally possess a desert tortoise?**

**A.** Yes. Individuals have been allowed to keep desert tortoises that were in captivity prior to 1989 as well as their progeny.

**Q. What is involved in being a custodian of a desert tortoise?**

**A.** Being a custodian of a desert tortoise requires a long-term commitment. Desert tortoises can live from 50 to 100 years and on average they grow to be about 15 pounds. They eat plant material, grasses and wildflowers. Custodians must have a safe yard with an enclosed area; need to construct a burrow to keep the tortoise cool during the summer

and to provide a place for it to hibernate during the winter; and work through an approved adoption program.

**Q. If there are so many pet desert tortoises why is the desert tortoise still protected as threatened under the Endangered Species Act?**

**A.** Although there is an abundance of unwanted pet tortoises, their ability to contribute to the recovery of the species is limited because of disease, genetics issues, and difficulty in identifying suitable relocation areas. One of the fundamental purposes of the ESA is to conserve the ecosystems upon which species depend, and raising individuals in captivity does not meet that purpose. The primary threat to desert tortoises are habitat-based, and simply putting more tortoises in the wild is not effective if habitat quality is not sufficient to support them, or more importantly, support successful reproduction of wild tortoises already there. Addressing these issues in pet tortoises requires costly resources that could otherwise be spent on recovery of wild populations.

**Q. Are captive tortoises a threat to wild tortoises?**

**A.** Potentially. While captive and wild desert tortoises may carry many of the same diseases, captive tortoises could carry transmissible diseases to which the wild population has not been exposed. Diseases may not be apparent in a captive situation where the tortoise is well fed and watered, but can progress to become more debilitating and transmissible under the harsh conditions of the desert environment.

**Q. Is it legal to release pet tortoises back into the wild?**

**A.** No. It is illegal to release pets directly into wild because of the threat of disease transmission from pet tortoises to wild tortoises. Pet tortoises must be carefully screened for disease and health issues. Tortoises that have been surrendered to the DTCC, for instance, and are healthy, may be translocated back to the wild in areas that contribute to the recovery of the species.

**Q. Is it legal to sell or give away unwanted pet desert tortoises?**

**A.** It is illegal to sell tortoises or any of their parts. Pets however, may be transferred from one custodian through an online registration program at <http://tortoisegroup.org/adoption.php>.

**Q. How can I adopt a tortoise?**

**A.** Tortoises are available for adoption through an approved adoption program. For more information on the Tortoise Group adoption program visit: <http://tortoisegroup.org/adoption.php>, or contact them by E-mail: [info@tortoisegroup.org](mailto:info@tortoisegroup.org), or by phone at (702) 739-7113.

*Unwanted Pet Desert Tortoises*

**Q. What is the history of the pet tortoise pick-up service and Desert Tortoise Conservation Center (DTCC) and why was it established?**

**A.** In 1996 as an optional conservation action for Clark County, a pet pick-up service was included with the collection of wild tortoises from construction sites because it

reduced the threat to wild desert tortoise populations. In 2009 Clark County went back to collecting only wild tortoises, and the Service assumed responsibility for the established pet pick-up service. These unwanted pets, as well as the wild tortoises collected by Clark County, are taken to the DTCC.

Clark County operated the DTCC as a transfer and holding facility from 1993 to 2007 through a private contractor permitted by the Service. In 2007 to 2009 the facility was operated by private contractors overseen by USFWS and BLM. In March 2009, the San Diego Zoo Group assumed responsibility for daily operations of the DTCC through a cooperative relationship with USFWS and BLM.

**Q. How many pet desert tortoises come in to the DTCC each year and why can't they be released to the wild?**

**A.** Over 1,000 tortoises arrive at the DTCC each year. Tortoises at the DTCC undergo health screenings when they arrive. Approximately 500 of these tortoises are moved to a large scale translocation site outside of Las Vegas each year.

Some tortoises cannot be released to the translocation site. Many diseases in pet tortoises are secondary to inappropriate diets and poor husbandry. Many also have misshapen shells or are of abnormal shape or size. These animals are likely at risk for reduced survival if released into the desert.

**Q. How many desert tortoises are currently at the DTCC?**

**A.** There are approximately 1,800 desert tortoises at the DTCC.

**Q. Is the pet desert tortoise pick-up service going to continue, and will the DTCC continue to take unwanted pet tortoises?**

**A.** The pet pick-up service has been terminated and the DTCC will transition from a transfer-and-holding facility for unwanted pets to a facility that will support range-wide recovery efforts for the desert tortoise through conservation research, on-the-ground recovery actions, training of biologists, and public education.

**Q. What options are available to owners of unwanted pet tortoise?**

**A.** Individuals that are unable to continue to care for their pets and cannot transfer them to another custodian through an online registration program at <http://tortoisegroup.org/adoption.php> or surrender them to the Lied Animal Shelter, 655 North Mojave Road, Las Vegas, NV 89101, phone: 702-384-3333.

**Q. Are the laws regarding pet desert tortoises going to change?**

**A.** To help address the underlying issues caused by the proliferation of unwanted pet tortoises, NDOW is considering an amendment to NAC 503.093 (Appropriate license, permit or authorization required to hunt, take or possess protected wildlife; exceptions). The NAC would be amended to provide the Service with greater flexibility to allow persons to possess a desert tortoise without a permit through avenues beyond a formal adoption program, (i.e. the gifting of captive desert tortoises). NDOW also anticipates implementing a change in this NAC that would limit possession of captive desert tortoise

to only one per individual if they obtained their tortoise after enactment of this regulation. Public workshops and approval of the regulation change by the Board of Wildlife Commissioners and the Legislative Commission or their Subcommittee to Review Regulations will be required before the amended regulation can be adopted.