



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

For Release July 24, 1989

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MOJAVE DESERT TORTOISE POPULATION
TO BE ADDED TO ENDANGERED SPECIES LIST:
EMERGENCY LISTING SPURRED BY DISEASE IN WILD POPULATION

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced its intent to use emergency authority to list as endangered a population of the desert tortoise currently threatened by an outbreak of a fatal respiratory disease as well as other little-understood disease problems.

The Service's Northwest Regional Director Marvin Plenert said, "We are taking emergency action now in an attempt to prevent any further loss to the Mojave desert tortoise population already devastated by these diseases. Although listing the species will not stop the spread of the diseases, it will afford the tortoise extra protection while scientists are working to control the outbreaks."

The desert tortoise in the United States is generally confined to two populations--a Mojave Desert population whose range extends from Southern California into Nevada, Utah, and Arizona; and a Sonoran desert population in portions of Arizona. It is the Mojave Desert population (or all wild tortoises north and west of the Colorado River) which will be emergency listed.

The desert tortoise has been recognized as a candidate for rangewide listing for a number of years. Tortoises inhabiting the Beaver Dam Slope area of southwestern Utah were listed as threatened in 1980, with 39 square miles of designated critical habitat. Most habitat for the desert tortoise is found on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). That agency has been in the forefront of efforts to protect the species. The BLM recently developed a rangewide plan aimed at protecting the tortoise and enhancing its habitat. The plan also addresses the interests of other Federal agencies, state agencies, the livestock industry, and conservation organizations. Careful monitoring of tortoise populations not impacted by this listing also is required.

Acting Service Director Steve Robinson said, "The Service also will continue to work with BLM on efforts to protect and enhance desert tortoise populations in concert with BLM's other
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activities. The information BLM has already collected on the species will prove invaluable in this effort." Robinson added, "We will also concentrate our joint efforts on identifying those areas outside the core tortoise areas so that the least possible interruption in human activities will be assured."

In 1985, in response to a petition filed by several conservation organizations to list the tortoise as endangered throughout the remainder of its range in the United States, the Service found that listing was warranted but precluded by other higher-priority listing actions. However, a current request for emergency listing by the Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Defenders of Wildlife contains significant new information about an outbreak of a highly contagious respiratory disease believed to be responsible for the dramatic decline in the Mojave Desert population.

The "Desert Tortoise Respiratory Disease Complex" or "Upper Respiratory Syndrome" has been diagnosed for at least 20 years in tortoises kept in captivity. Only recently has the disease been observed in the wild. Although believed to be a chronic viral disease, its precise nature is unknown and it has no known cure. It is believed that the disease weakens the tortoises, making them vulnerable to life-threatening secondary infections. Scientists are particularly concerned because the disease is impacting reproductively active tortoises as well as juveniles. Also, at least one other potentially devastating disease has been documented recently in desert tortoise populations.

According to the petition, populations in the Desert Tortoise Natural Area in the western Mojave Desert have declined 58 percent in 4 years in one study area, from 481 in 1985 to about 200 in 1989. In that population, 8.9 percent of the remaining tortoises exhibit signs of the disease. At another study plot several miles north, over 30 tortoises out of 164 surveyed in the spring of 1988 have been found dead, and two-thirds of the remainder show symptoms of the disease. There is additional evidence that the disease may be widespread in the remainder of the Mojave Desert population.

Emergency protection of the desert tortoise will take effect immediately upon publication in the Federal Register and will extend for 240 days, during which the Service will proceed with the formal listing process.

An open public comment period will take place during the same time-frame. The Service proposes that immediate discussions begin on development of a recovery implementation plan which would address both the short-term crisis and long-term viability of desert tortoise populations.



FISH & WILDLIFE

Facts

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR • FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FACTS ABOUT THE DESERT TORTOISE

The desert tortoise is one of only three land tortoises native to the United States. The others are the gopher tortoise in the Southeast (threatened in parts of its range), and the Berlandier's tortoise in Texas.

The desert tortoise is fairly large, measuring up to 10-12 inches in shell length, and weighing 3-6 pounds.

Tortoises dig long burrows, making cover sites for other species. They use the burrows in extreme hot or cold weather, during which they remain inactive.

Tortoises are herbivores, preferring to feed on flowertops in spring and grasses during other times of the year.

The desert tortoise has a rather extensive range in the western Mojave and Sonoran Deserts, but its distribution is considered spotty. Also, they spend a large amount of time in their burrows. For these reasons, it is relatively difficult to determine their numbers and population trends over time.

FWS- F-063

For further information, contact:

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It takes about 15 years for a tortoise to reach sexual maturity. Young tortoises, because of their small size and slow growth, are particularly vulnerable to predators, such as ravens and coyotes, for up to 10 years. Consequently, juveniles have a high mortality rate. Once a tortoise reaches maturity, however, it can produce 4-8 eggs per year. It is believed that desert tortoises can live up to 50 years, giving them a long reproductive life.

Threats facing the desert tortoise include overgrazing by livestock, which limits their food supply; off-road vehicles, which can destroy habitat and crush the tortoises in their burrows; predators which prey on eggs and young tortoises; highways and urbanization, which fragment the size of remaining habitats; and respiratory disease as well as other little-known diseases which appear to be spreading rapidly into natural populations.

Also, some people take tortoises from the wild and make them household pets. This is now illegal in all states. Once a tortoise has been in captivity, it has difficulty readapting to existence in the wild and often acquires respiratory disease. The disease can be introduced into native populations, causing many fatalities. Thus, tortoises should not be returned to the desert. Persons who currently have a tortoise and feel they do not want it any longer should contact their state wildlife agency.