

SONORAN DESERT TORTOISE
[*Gopherus* (=Xerobates, =Scaptochelys) morafkai]

STATUS: No Federal Status

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: Adult Sonoran desert tortoises range in length from 8 to 15 inches (in), with a relatively high domed shell, usually brownish with a pattern and prominent growth lines. The plastron (bottom shell) is yellowish and is not hinged. The hind limbs are very stocky and elephantine; forelimbs are flattened for digging and covered with large conical scales. Males are differentiated from females by having elongated gular (throat) shields, chin glands visible on each side of the lower jaw (most evident during the breeding season), a concave plastron, and larger overall size.

HABITAT: Sonoran desert tortoises are most closely associated with the Arizona Upland and Lower Colorado River subdivisions of Sonoran Desertscrub. They are also found in Mojave Desertscrub, Madrean Evergreen Woodland, Semidesert Grassland, and Interior Chaparral in Arizona; and Plains of Sonora and Sinaloan Thornscrub in Mexico. They commonly occur on rocky, steep slopes and bajadas (lower mountain slopes) and in paloverde-mixed cacti associations. Incised washes are important features for sheltering in lower elevation habitat. Ninety-five percent of records in Arizona occur between 900 to 4,200 feet in elevation.

RANGE: Historical: Found in suitable habitat south and east of the Colorado River in Arizona in all counties except Apache, Coconino, Greenlee, and Navajo; the genetically pure genotype extends south of the international border to the Rio Sonora central Sonora, Mexico.

Current: Historical core populations remain extant in Arizona with some level of contraction as a result of habitat loss. Currently occupied range in Mexico is less understood.

REASONS FOR DECLINE/VULNERABILITY: The most significant risk factors for Sonoran desert tortoises are: 1) altered plant communities, primarily due to the invasion of nonnative grasses; 2) altered fire regimes, also related to the changes in plant communities; 3) habitat conversion of native vegetation to developed landscapes; 4) habitat fragmentation by the construction of permanent linear structures like highways and canals; 5) human-tortoise interactions such as handling, collecting, and killing individual tortoises intentionally or unintentionally (especially by vehicle strikes); and 6) climate change as it relates to increases in the frequency, scope, and duration of drought.

LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP: Major land owners include the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Department of Defense, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona State Land Department, Tribal and private lands.

NOTES: The Sonoran desert tortoise is classified as a Tier 1b “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and is listed in the NOM-059-SEMARNAT-2010 as a threatened species in Mexico.

Under Arizona Revised Statutes 17-306 and 17-309, and Commission Order 43, Sonoran desert tortoises in Arizona may not be collected from the wild, nor released as captives into the wild. As restricted live wildlife (R12-4-406), Sonoran desert tortoises may not be imported, exported, or possessed without special license or lawful exemption.

In 2011, the Sonoran desert tortoise was elevated to full species status. The currently accepted scientific name is now *Gopherus morafkai*. In some literature, the common name Morafka’s desert tortoise may be used, but we retain the common name, Sonoran desert tortoise, to avoid unnecessary confusion.