

8/14/89

Opinion

A solid approach on desert tortoise

Call it the Short Term Habitat Conservation Plan, the landmark intergovernmental compact, two years in the making and designed to both give the desert tortoise breathing room and let development continue in the Las Vegas Valley.

The plan opens up more than 22,000 acres in Clark County for development over three years in exchange for the eventual establishment of at least 400,000 acres of protected desert tortoise habitat in the county's outback areas.

The agreement — formulated by local governments in conjunction with scientists, conservation groups, developers and others — has now been officially sanctioned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The compact will accommodate developers — who have been stymied in many areas of the Las Vegas Valley during the two years since the desert tortoise was declared endangered — and the increasingly rare reptile whose populations have suffered from a respiratory malady.

The federal Endangered Species Act, under whose provisions the tortoise is listed as "threatened," makes no provision for human needs — it demands only that the habitat of endangered species be safeguarded. And yet, the agreement signed this week manages, with an elevated degree of expertise, to satisfy both the rigid provisions of the Endangered Species Act and the growth requirements of the Las Vegas urban area.

One of the key players in formulating the habitat conservation plan was the Virginia-based Nature Conservancy, whose MO is a free-market approach to conservation. The Conservancy announced this week it has signed an option to acquire 160,000 acres of prime tortoise habitat near Searchlight, which will provide the nucleus for a larger Tortoise Management Area.

"In every way," crows a county news release, the agreement "represents an historic achievement — not only for Clark County and the cities but, because of the positive precedent being set, for the nation as a whole." Journalists often tend to dismiss such proclamations as self-serving, but in this case, the self-congratulation is justified. The agreement represents a solid, workable plan that balances economic necessities with environmental imperatives — that allows tortoises and humans to peacefully coexist.