

# Too Many Desert Tortoises?

## Background

The Mojave desert tortoise is listed as a threatened species, protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and Nevada Revised Statutes. Wild desert tortoise populations have declined due to habitat degradation and fragmentation, and the direct loss of individual tortoises due to human activity such as poaching, collecting for pets, vehicular impact, and predator encroachment.

Many states allow desert tortoises to be held in captivity as pets, including Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. In the State of Nevada it is legal to have a desert tortoise in your possession if it was obtained prior to the tortoise's listing as a protected species in August 1989 (pre-Act), or if it is obtained through a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) authorized adoption program.

Wildlife management agencies estimate that there are 200,000 pet desert tortoises living in homes in Clark County, Nevada. A large number of these pets are not pre-Act nor officially adopted tortoises, but are the progeny of pets passed on to friends, neighbors and relatives over the years. Over 1,000 unwanted and/or stray pet desert tortoises are surrendered every year. Many of these are young hatchlings, the result of backyard breeding.

With no proven and/or cost-effective way to spay or neuter pet desert tortoises, unchecked desert tortoise custodianship and backyard breeding of these animals has become a challenge for the community, and it is taking valuable conservation resources away from recovering the species in the wild.



## The Role of the USFWS & NDOW

Desert tortoises are protected wildlife that fall under the jurisdiction of Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), and are further protected under federal law as a threatened species under the jurisdiction of the USFWS. These agencies are responsible for the management of these animals. The USFWS authorizes pet adoptions.

## The Role of Animal Control Offices

Municipal Animal Control Offices do not have authority to manage desert tortoises. Even though NDOW and USFWS allow these animals to be held as pets within municipal jurisdictions, they are still classified as wildlife, and are further classified as protected under state and federal law.

## The Role of the MSHCP

Clark County Desert Conservation Program (DCP) provided for the collection and management of unwanted and stray pet desert tortoises until 2009. This was done in conjunction with managing wild desert tortoises displaced by construction sites and as a pilot project to assist the USFWS and the local adoption group, as they had too many tortoises than they could care for with their foster families.

After extensive analysis, the DCP determined that the volume of animals being surrendered and the requirements for care were cost prohibitive and unsustainable. In addition, addressing and correcting these issues was outside the purview of the DCP and local jurisdictions. On October 6, 2009, the Clark County Board of Commissioners (BCC) passed a resolution directing staff in the DCP to transition the care and management of these pets to the agencies responsible for state and federally protected wildlife, NDOW and USFWS, as it was not a required action under the Clark County Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSHCP). Staff successfully completed this transition on December 31, 2009.

As required by the MSHCP, the DCP continues to operate a Wild Desert Tortoise Assistance Line, which provides for the collection of wild desert tortoises found in harm's way on construction sites.



## Backyard Breeding

Citizens with multiple pet desert tortoises have been allowing these tortoises to breed in their backyards, producing thousands of unwanted pet and stray pet desert tortoises annually. Many people believe that breeding desert tortoises will increase populations and thereby help the species to recover in the wild. Many simply don't think about the consequences of not separating their male and female tortoises. And then there are those who don't realize they have a breeding pair until it is too late!

Unwanted pet and stray pet desert tortoises do not necessarily help recover the tortoise in the wild. Wildlife management agencies are currently evaluating how these animals might help augment wild populations. Pet desert tortoises may carry disease that could threaten wild populations, and tortoises raised in captivity may not survive as well as wild tortoises when faced with desert conditions.

Historically, unwanted or stray pet desert tortoises have been collected and taken to the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center. For the past several years, over 1,000 tortoises are turned in annually, with September being a peak month when babies are hatched. Many of these tortoises have been placed at the Large Scale Translocation Site, near Jean, Nevada. A small amount have been adopted to new homes. Currently, more desert tortoises are being brought to the Center than are being placed elsewhere.

## What's the Solution?

Programs like the DCP are encouraging wildlife management agencies to determine ways to get healthy tortoises back into the desert where they can contribute to recovery of the species. If managed correctly, many of these unwanted and stray pet desert tortoises could be successfully translocated to the wild.

While successful research has been completed for sterilization of other species of turtles and tortoises, there is no known cost-effective, minimally-invasive method for the endoscopic sterilization of desert tortoise. The success of endoscopic surgery is dependent upon species-specific anatomy and therefore a feasibility study would be required to determine the success of sterilization in desert tortoise.

The College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Georgia, has developed a proposed Statement of Work and budget to perform this feasibility study and sterilize 30 desert tortoises. Interstate permit requirements, shipping costs and time of year/temperature constraints, researcher availability, and funding are challenges that have delayed pursuing this study.

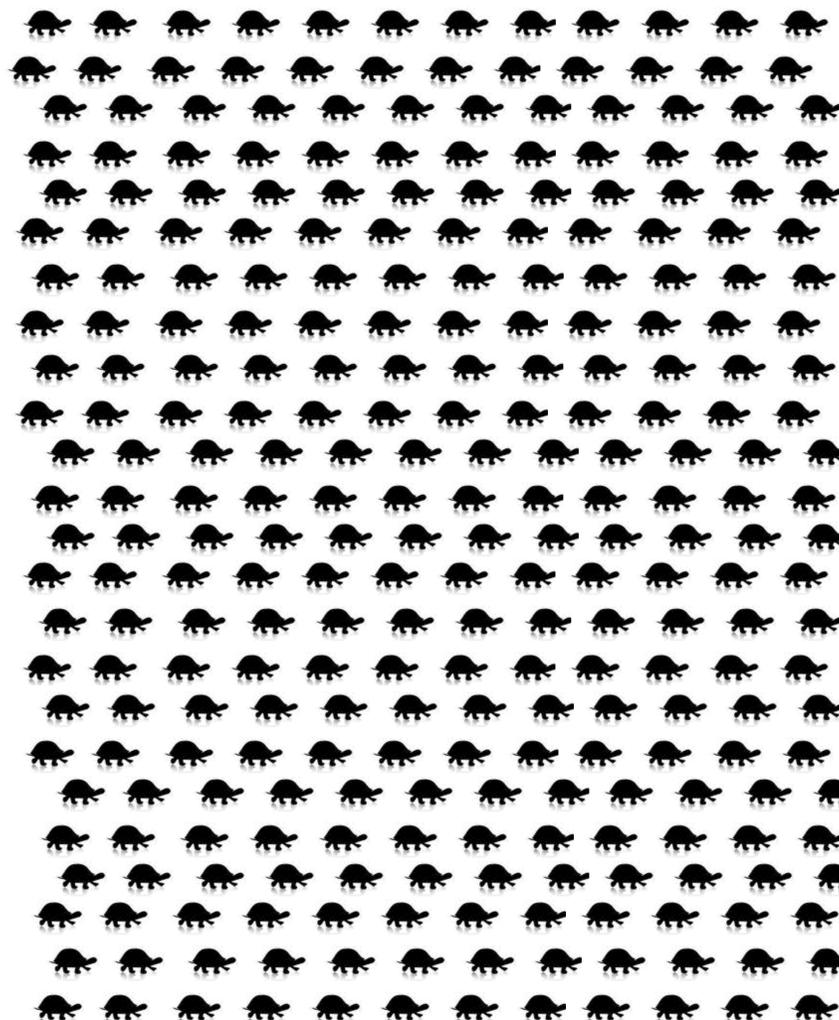
In the meantime, desert tortoise custodians are asked to keep male and female tortoises separate to avoid breeding. Government agencies and other stakeholders are pursuing an amendment to State laws to prohibit the number of Mojave desert tortoises per household that can be held in captivity, as well as outlawing the breeding of captive Mojave desert tortoises.

While wild desert tortoises may be struggling to survive, pet desert tortoises that receive proper care and shelter breed well in captivity.

One female tortoise can have as many as 24 babies in one year.



Under proper conditions, twelve female tortoises can produce up to 288 tortoises in one year.



If there are 200,000 pet desert tortoises in Clark County and *half* of those tortoises are female (100,000), and *half* of those females are sexually mature (50,000), and *half* of those sexually mature female tortoises are housed with a sexually mature male (25,000), they could produce **600,000** baby tortoises in one year (25,000 X 24).

## Contacts

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)  
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Tortoise Group  
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[www.tortoisegroup.org/](http://www.tortoisegroup.org/)

Desert Tortoise Information Line  
(702) 383-TORT (8678)

Wild Desert Tortoise Assistance Line  
(702) 593-9027