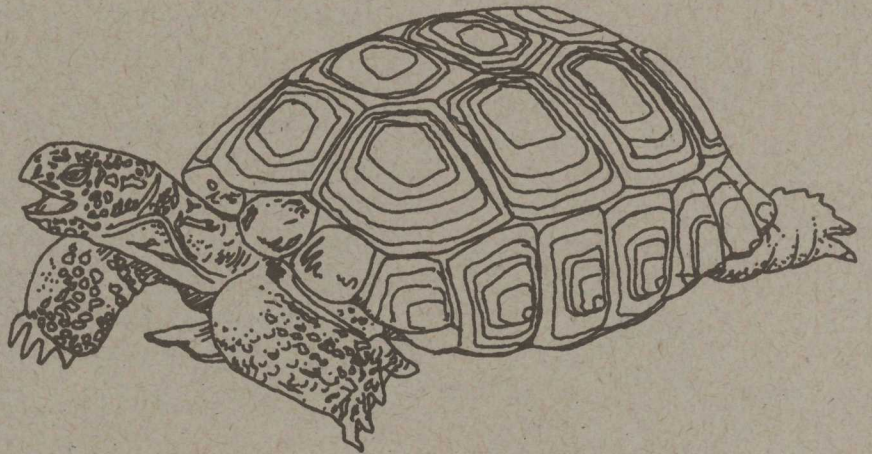


Lake Mead

National Recreation Area
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Desert Tortoise



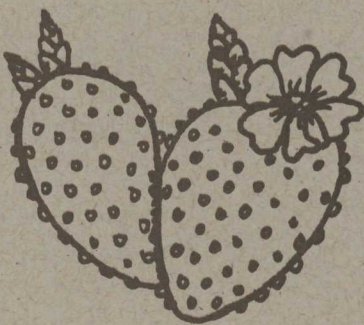
Desert Tortoise

Like the Joshua tree, the slow-moving desert tortoise has come to symbolize the Mojave Desert.

For many of us, an encounter with a wild desert tortoise is the thrill of a lifetime. Almost everyone loves tortoises, and many people keep

them as pets. Yet there are signs that, as the human population expands in the desert areas, we may be loving tortoises to death. Some tortoise populations near urban areas have already disappeared, and others may not be far behind.

Natural History

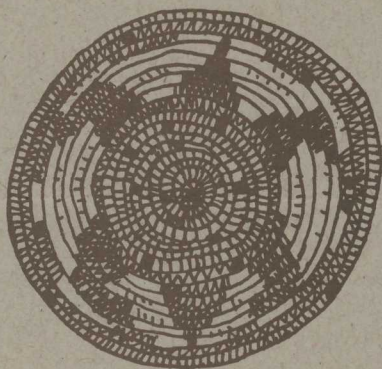


Desert tortoises occur in scattered populations throughout the southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico. Unlike aquatic turtles, they are strictly land-dwelling and avoid water except for occasional drinks. Like other reptiles, tortoises cannot control their body temperature internally. They avoid extreme temperatures by retreating to underground burrows and, only when conditions are favorable, do they emerge to drink and feed on grasses, flowers, and cactus fruit.

Baby tortoises, which hatch from eggs in late summer, are less than two inches long and are vulnerable

to predation by coyotes, dogs, ravens, and other animals. It has been estimated that in the wild only one hatchling from every 15-20 nests reaches maturity. Since maturity does not occur until age 15 or older, tortoises probably depend on longevity to maintain population levels. Due to their secretive lifestyle, however, many details of their private lives will remain unknown until long-term studies have been conducted. It is thought that individual tortoises, inhabiting the same patch of desert land for season after season, may live for 50 or even 100 years.

Encountering Desert Tortoises



Unless you were born here or have raised a family in Nevada, chances are that the tortoise you meet at Lake Mead National Recreation Area (NRA) has been here longer than you! It knows its home area well—where to go for nutritious spring shoots and summer grasses, or for precious water after a summer rain. From many years of experience, it has discovered the best shelters and the most direct routes to them. A tortoise you see crossing a road is probably not lost, but following a path established long before the pavement was laid.

What should you do if you see a tortoise? Unless it is crossing a busy road, the best thing is to leave it alone and watch it from afar. Bothering or holding wild tortoises is illegal in Nevada, California, Arizona and Utah and for a good reason. When tortoises feel threatened, they often void water. The water is distasteful to a predator—but would

have allowed the tortoise to survive a prolonged drought. However, if a tortoise is in danger of being hit on the busy road, pick it up gently and place it off the road *in the direction it was headed and preferably in the shade.*

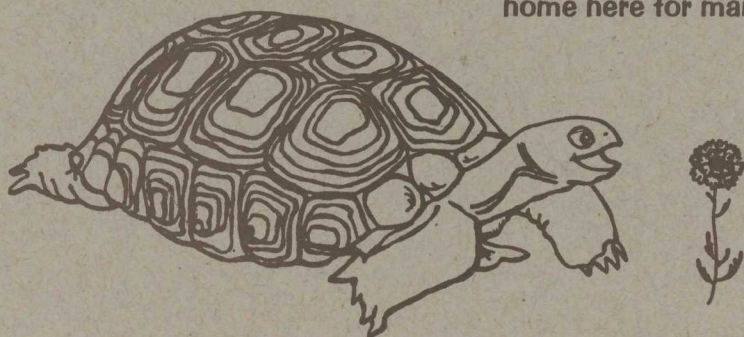
Many people feel they should move tortoises they find to a National Park or release tortoises they can no longer care for. Please don't! Wild tortoises belong where they live now and probably have a better chance of surviving in a familiar area than in a new, unfamiliar place. Releasing pet tortoises into the wild is illegal, because they may displace existing wild tortoises or transfer an upper respiratory tract disease (URTD). URTD is suspected of killing hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of desert tortoises in the Mojave Desert. Also, pet tortoises rarely have skills necessary to adapt to a natural area.

Helping Desert Tortoises

At Lake Mead National Recreation Area, we are actively working with Clark County, Nevada, University of Nevada, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), Arizona Game and Fish (AGF) and the Biological Resource Division (BRD) of the United States Geological Survey (USGS) to learn more about desert tortoises. Studies in the park include population surveys and monitoring, as well as demographic studies to determine the life span of tortoises and causes of death. Future studies are planned to determine the effects of wildland fires on tortoises. We have much to learn about the life history and habitat needs of these ancient and fascinating animals. Our goal is to ensure that our desert tortoises will find a good home here for many years to come.

There are some things you can do to help desert tortoises. If you can no longer care for your pet, call the Clark County Desert Conservation Hotline at (702) 383-TORT. They have an adoption program for tortoises and will find it a caring home. If you hear of someone else taking a tortoise from the wild, teach them what you know, or share this handout with them.

If you encounter a desert tortoise while enjoying Lake Mead NRA, do not touch the tortoise and please contact the Resources Division at 293-8978 or fill out a wildlife observation card available at the Alan Bible Visitor Center, ranger stations, and Lake Mead headquarters in Boulder City. Your location information will increase our knowledge of where tortoises are living in the park.



Perhaps the best way we can assist tortoises is to help save their diminishing habitat by participating in desert preservation efforts.

