

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

Sonoran Desert Tortoise



Photo: © George Andrejko

A TORTOISE RACING TO EXTINCTION

Sonoran Desert Tortoise populations are found primarily on the rocky slopes and bajadas of the Sonoran Desert of Arizona and have declined by 51 percent on monitored plots since 1987. Other populations of desert tortoises are federally protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but in 1991, the federal government denied protection for Sonoran Desert Tortoises. Because of urban sprawl, irresponsible land use, off-road vehicles, disease, and livestock grazing, the Sonoran Desert Tortoise is at risk of extinction. Without federal protection, we may lose this rare tortoise and its contributions to the web of life forever.

PROTECTING DESERTS

Desert tortoise populations are being assaulted by a myriad of threats, but livestock grazing may be the most widespread. In nearly all tortoise habitat, livestock directly compete for forage, trample vegetation, introduce exotic plants, enhance probability and intensity of fires, damage tortoise burrows and other cover sites, and alter tortoise behavior. If listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Sonoran Desert Tortoise should be given habitat protections that will not only ensure its survival for future generations, but other co-existing desert species as well.

KNOW YOUR TORTOISE

- Life Span: Sonoran Desert Tortoises can live to be thirty-five years or older.
- Burrows: Sonoran Desert Tortoises have limbs tailored for burrowing and spend 95 percent of their lives in burrows.
- Sexual Peak: tortoises reach sexual maturity at 10-20 years and approximately 8.6 inches carapace length.
- Desert Giants: desert tortoises are one of the largest herbivores in their ecosystems in terms of mass, but can only eat plant life that is less than 0.5 meters from the ground.

CLIMATE CHAOS

Extended drought caused by climate change leads to more stress, decreased forage, and consequently decreased tortoise reproduction.

