

# Tortoise Group Newsletter

The Organization for the Protection of Nevada's Resident Tortoises, Inc.  
A non-profit organization since 1982

Hotline: 702-739-7113

Volume XXI No. 1 March 2008

[www.TortoiseGroup.org](http://www.TortoiseGroup.org)

Las Vegas, Nevada

## I Sell MegaDiet...but that's just the beginning

by Kathy Utiger

My first customer of the year came yesterday--- somebody who is keeping a hatchling awake inside wanted one bag of MegaDiet. We recommend keeping even hatchlings outside their first year. I assume this is someone who has little knowledge of tortoises, so I will have a lot to share. I scurry around and get out my heaps of tortoise information.

John is the most delightful young man doing the best he can for his little tortoise. He is concerned about roadrunners finding little hatchling Earl in his first winter. John is very interested in MegaDiet and how to offer it. We visit Tad's habitat and talk about building one for his hatchling. We discuss hatchling burrows, plants, flooding, and the nutritional value of various foods. I provide him with some of our Information Sheets, we laugh and talk a lot and enjoy the specialness of tortoises.

As I close the door I hear myself say, "What a nice guy!" Then I laugh, because that's what I say every time. Tortoise people are so genuine. Sharing our interest in tortoises and some intimacies of our lives around them is exceptional. No wonder selling MegaDiet is a joy!

### MegaDiet Sellers Please Step Forward!

- Green Valley 2 or 3 needed
- East side of Las Vegas
- Boulder City
- Charleston & Rancho
- Southwestern Las Vegas

All interested folks please call Betty for details at 702-739-8043.

Please consider sharing your own wealth of tortoise information by selling MegaDiet. The more sellers, the more available MegaDiet is to the public. We would like to have more sellers everywhere but especially in the areas mentioned below.



**Mr. Tortoise** by Janet Bremer. Best in Shell award in the 2007 Photo Contest.

## March 15, 1-3pm - Spectacular Event!

**The Mojave Desert, a photographic odyssey** by Sharon Schafer. Nine canyon and wilderness areas of our "ordinary" desert are presented in stunning beauty through Sharon's photos, sketches, and paintings. These photos are the basis of her exhibit presently hanging at the Museum. You'll kick yourself if you miss this one.

And.....

- Enjoy a scrumptious root beer float
- Receive a free colorful plant for your tortoise habitat

**Location:** Nevada State Museum & Historical Society, 700 Twin Lakes Drive in Lorenzi Park. Call 804-0472 for directions.

Please send stories and photos to [kutiger@embarqmail.com](mailto:kutiger@embarqmail.com) (new address)

## MegaDiet Corner

The Tortoise Group website offers an amazing wealth of information on MegaDiet. Check out some of these topics and many more at

<http://www.tortoisegroup.org/megadiet.html>

- Converting a Tortoise from Vegetables to MegaDiet
- What If My Tortoise Won't Eat MegaDiet?
- MegaDiet Ingredients
- MegaDiet Sellers in the Las Vegas Area
- What's Wrong with Feeding My Tortoise Sweet Fruit?

No access to the web? Send a self addressed stamped envelope stating which information you desire. Betty Burge, 5157 Poncho Circle, Las Vegas, NV 89119. (1 stamp/4 sheets of paper)

### Creative Tips on Introducing MegaDiet

- Soften MegaDiet to cookie dough consistency. Try unsweetened apple sauce or liquefied lettuce instead of water
- Grate apple to juicy state to soften MegaDiet. Yum!
- Soften and roll up in a grape leaf, rose petal or other favorite leaf (not lettuce)
- Hollow out half a cherry tomato and fill with softened MegaDiet
- Soften and stud the surface thickly with rose petals or desert willow flowers.
- Go cold turkey. No muss, no fuss.
- Email your tips to Kathy at [kutiger@embarqmail.com](mailto:kutiger@embarqmail.com)

Remember that these tips are to get your tortoise started on MegaDiet. Later, gradually lessen the apple or juice so your tortoise eats plain MegaDiet.

### MegaDiet Factoid

Sales of MegaDiet increased 17.7% in 2007!

### Have You or Your email Address Moved?

Please remember to send us your new physical and email address.

## MegaDiet Satellite Sellers

Please call sellers for appointment

Nellis & Owens Georgi – 459-1274

Camino al Norte & W. Ann Rd  
Greg & Char – 649-1630

I-215 & Lone Mtn Lynn – 655-5698

I-215 & Far Hills  
Kathy & Pauline – 804-0472, 9am – 7pm

Rainbow & Alta Kellie – 217-7796  
(work phone – ask for Kellie)

Tropicana & Maryland Betty – 739-8043

Dean Martin & Blue Diamond  
Carolyn – 876-0668, ext. 874

Silverado Ranch & S. Maryland Pkwy  
Helene – 878-7877

Boulder Hwy & Equestrian  
Gail – 334-0015 Cell

Warm Springs & Lake Mead  
Gay – 563-1924

Pahrump Sheri – 775-727-5557

Kingman, AZ Toni – 928-757-8317

OnLine Store at:

<http://www.tortoisegroup.org/sales/intoshop.php>

No computer? Call Betty – 702-739-8043

A 1½ lb bag costing \$8.00 lasts a large desert tortoise about one month. MegaDiet is also sold at Tortoise Group meetings.

**10% discount to TG members  
who show their cards**

### Seeking Volunteers

- Charleston & Rancho
- Green Valley
- Boulder City
- East & Southwest Las Vegas

Call Betty for details at 702-739-8043

## **Encouraging News from Clark County**

What would you do with 1200 desert tortoises of which only about 50 are wild and the rest are unwanted or escaped pets? Years ago, Chairman Betty Burge helped to project for the County the number of tortoises that would be turned in to the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center (DTCC) in the following years.

You can imagine that the numbers projected were ever increasing. Such has been the case. Now those working on the implementation of the Clark County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (CCMSHCP), led by Marci Henson, Plan Administrator, are assembling a task force to develop recommendations regarding collection, care, and placement of unwanted pet tortoises. The considerable funds needed to support this effort for these long-lived tortoises come out of the same conservation budget as protective measures for the numerous wild species that are part the CCMSHCP.

As a stakeholder in the placement of these tortoises, Tortoise Group will be represented on this task force. Relocation studies of tortoises, even those bred and raised in captivity, show they live as successfully on release sites as the wild tortoises; however, adequate desert area for these releases is not easy to find.

**Hear our plea: stop backyard breeding.** There comes a time when finding good homes for the progeny is not possible. Children handing them out at schools without adequate information on care is a growing problem. We receive an increasing number of calls from adults whose children have accepted a tortoise without parental knowledge. Parents have had no opportunity to consider what might be involved and an adequate area may not be available. Some adults soon realize the preparation and care needed and want to give up the tortoise. Some don't give up the tortoise and the horror stories about the results of poor care start coming in to Tortoise Group.

We are optimistic that under the administration of the DTCC by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this long-standing problem of over abundance of tortoises at the DTCC will be solved. You can help.



**Tad, we adore you** by Kathy Utiger. Tortoise with People award from the 2007 Photo Contest. With Daniel and Jane Hiura.

## **April 20, Sunday at 9 am to noon Field Trip to the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center (DTCC)**

Tour the DTCC inside and out. Learn from facility manager Michelle McDermott how tortoises came to be held at the DTCC and about research past and present. See tortoises of all sizes. This wonderful outdoor activity is also a great chance to swap tortoise stories and learn from others. Children will enjoy seeing tortoises and their temporary homes.

**Directions:** From I-15, travel west on Blue Diamond to Buffalo, the entrance to Mountains Edge development. At Buffalo, turn left (south) and continue until it ends at Starr Rd. Turn left (east) to Rainbow. Again turn left and go a very short distance to the power line road, which takes you to the DTCC. Only the power line road is still unpaved! No need for special vehicles. Look for the Tortoise Group signs.

## Question Corner by Betty Burge

Answers to FAQs can be found on our website, [www.tortoisegroup.org](http://www.tortoisegroup.org), our Hotline, 702-739-7113, and in our free booklet, **Desert Tortoises Adoption and Care**, available at all animal hospitals and branches of the public library in Clark County.

**Q.** How much area does a hatchling need?

**A.** Desert Tortoise studies at the Nevada Test Site determined that hatchlings wander widely before settling down to a particular area. We have found that a pen 5 x 20 feet, (100 square feet) is accepted without frantic pacing or falling on their backs trying to climb out. As soon as I am sure that my hatchlings are eating the varied forage available and MegaDiet Tortoise Chow, I allow them to leave the enclosure at will to use the entire 1/3 acre. If allowed to leave on their own, they will find their way back if they wish. Before I let them move out, I install a number of burrows that are just their size using Rounded Rake roof tiles which will fit hatchlings snugly for about three years. The hatchlings dig out the soil as they grow to make just the proper fit. These burrows of special roof tiles available throughout the yard will be their preference for cover and they will rarely enter a burrow for a larger tortoise. This prevents the little ones from being inadvertently crushed.

The narrow access to the juvenile pen does not allow larger tortoises to enter, so there is always growing food, water and snug burrows for the small juveniles. The hatchlings and small juveniles use the entire yard, dig their own burrows where the soil allows, and find the dandelions in the patches of lawn. There are soil pathways that allow access to the food, water, and cover, and none of the small tortoises face exhaustion climbing over wide expanses of lawn grass to reach the necessities.

**Q.** Do I need to separate the hatchlings and small desert tortoises from the adults?

**A.** As a rule different size tortoises ignore one another. However, if you have a male it may challenge, try to mount, or flip a juvenile. Because

I am doing my part to stop breeding in captivity, I have no adult males. I keep a few hatchlings for educational purposes and to show how they utilize the enclosure. When I know that a juvenile is maturing and is male, I try to find someone who has no tortoises who would adopt my tortoise. As a last resort, the tortoise is turned over to the DTCC for release to the wild. It is reassuring to know that even captive raised tortoises do just fine when released to live in the wild.



**Spot negotiates some rocks** by Laura Deitsch

**Q.** Why is it so important to find a way to get my tortoise to drink water?

**A.** Dehydration seems to be a major cause of bladder stones. Single stones of urate salts may accumulate material until they reach 2-3 inches in diameter and become impossible for the tortoise to pass. This may cause death at a result of bladder infection or peritonitis. Surgery may be necessary and can be successful if you become aware of the problem in time. Your tortoise should occasionally pass white urate salts. If a low water dish or a soak in a basin does not work to encourage your tortoise to drink, make a depression in the soil---a more natural drinking spot. Pick a place you can use repeatedly. The tortoise will learn its location and may let you know when it wants a drink by visiting that spot. Soon after your tortoise emerges from winter sleep is an important time to start offering a drink. Some will drink for 20 minutes at a time!

## **Dr. K's Kolumn**

**By Christine Kolmstetter, DVM  
Cheyenne West Animal Hospital**

Hello! It's that time of year again when our backyard friends will soon be coming out of their burrows. One of the first things your tortoise is likely to do once he comes out of brumation is to get himself warmed up by basking in the sun. Once he is active and moving around, he will probably roam around the yard looking for a water source for soaking and drinking and of course for some food. As with any animal, proper nutrition is critical for normal growth and development and for maintaining overall good health. Nutritional disorders develop if the diet is not balanced in nutrients or if the environment in which that tortoise is housed is inadequate.

Since this area of the country is the native habitat for desert tortoises, it is critical that healthy pet desert tortoises be housed in their natural outdoor environment and not be maintained indoors. In the wild, desert tortoises have access to appropriate natural desert plants. When they are in our back yards, we must provide them with appropriate food items and a source of water.

Desert tortoises are categorized as herbivores or plant eaters. In comparison to carnivores or omnivores, herbivores require a diet very low in fat, relatively low in protein, and very high in fiber. Herbivores that ingest foods too high in fat or protein develop digestive upset and fail to thrive. The digestive tract of herbivorous reptiles is relatively large. The proteins and small amounts of fat from the food items are digested in the small intestine, and the fibers in the diet are fermented in the lower bowel which is a large fermentation vat. Desert tortoises are, therefore, hind-gut fermenters. Why is that important? Plant fibers are typically difficult to digest; however, the numerous bacteria in the hind-gut fermentation vat easily digest the cellulose that plants contain. The fibers in the lower bowel also retain water which helps to prevent dehydration. These digestion processes provide the energy and nutrients that the tortoise requires.

So what is the ideal diet for our desert tortoises? The answer comes from Mother Nature. We want to feed these animals a diet that mimics as much as possible what they would be eating in the wild. The problem, however, is that in the wild desert tortoises roam a large area in order to consume adequate amounts of desert plants. The average backyard typically cannot provide enough wildflower plants to provide adequate nutrition for these animals. Therefore, we recommend a tortoise chow, MegaDiet, for pet tortoises.

MegaDiet chow was developed for captive tortoises based on extensive research at the Smithsonian Institution National Zoo. This chow contains appropriate ratios of fiber, protein, fat, calcium, vitamins and other nutrients. Tortoises receiving MegaDiet should not be supplemented with additional calcium powder or vitamin products. Because this is a dry chow, it does not provide the water content that is found in most plants; therefore, it is extremely important that a source of fresh water always be available for your backyard tortoise. Good nutrition is not just about food but also about water. Although desert tortoises are able to conserve water due to their unique metabolism, clean water for drinking and soaking should be provided daily.

There are also numerous native plants that can be can planted in our backyard desert environment to provide additional food items for pet tortoises. A list of these plants as well as potentially toxic plants can be found on the Tortoise Group web page. Dandelions are one of the most nutritious plants that can be offered. Although they are not native desert plants and do require more water for growth, they can be grown from seeds and transplanted into the tortoise environment.

Food items that are inappropriate and should not be fed include cat food, dog food, and other sources of animal protein. Iceberg lettuce and other lettuces and frozen vegetable mixes are also very nutritionally inadequate.

We will continue our nutrition discussion in the next newsletter. See you then!

## Spring Doings for Your Tortoises

New tortoise owners may appreciate a few reminders about what to do for your tortoise when it finally emerges in March or April. By now your pen for hatchlings should be finished and the tortoises can wake up naturally. The earlier in the season a tortoise emerges for the first time and starts to bask for a few hours a day the longer it may be before it starts eating.

- Check the list of Satellite Sellers of MegaDiet in this newsletter. Buy some, put it in the refrigerator, not the freezer, and have it ready for your tortoise.
- Do a tortoise spring yard cleanup: Plastic grocery bags and large pieces of paper can entangle your tortoise if wedged inside the burrow. Take a few minutes to check for such litter and sparkly bits the tortoise might eat.
- Before your tortoise awakens, get those valuable dandelions transplanted. Don't wait too long. Print out Information Sheet #13 at <http://www.tortoisegroup.org/infosheet13.html>. No computer? Send us a self addressed stamped envelope and request that sheet. Dandelions need all the help they can get to become established. Don't worry, come summer you will have a hard time seeing them in the grass but the tortoises can find them.
- Give your tortoise a soak in a basin with lukewarm water that does not come up to the nose as the tortoise stands in the basin. Do not leave the tortoise. It may just soak or may also drink. When drinking, the snout may stay under water for 15-20 minutes! When it tries to climb out of the basin remove it, dry it completely, and set it in the sun.
- Check to see that the eyes are open and are clear of discharge or cloudiness. If caked, gently wipe warm water along the edges of the lids with a Q-Tip. Several applications should free any dried matter holding the eye closed. That may be just the first step in treating the problem.

- Give the body a good looking over for any sores. Open sores can attract flies and their maggots are a real threat.
- Dust off any ticks into a bucket of soapy water using a dry toothbrush. See our Information Sheet #18.
- If you think your tortoise has a health problem, we have a list of veterinarians in the Las Vegas area who take care of tortoise problems, Information Sheet #24.
- Cockroaches sharing the burrow are keeping it tidy. They are not a problem for tortoises. If you are concerned because cockroaches or ants are coming in your house, have a reputable pest spraying service just spray the base of the house where it meets the ground or pavement. Do not spray the foliage. Tortoise are very sensitive to poisons and total yard spraying will be killing helpful insects as well as those you think you don't want. For years we have been asking homeowners that we visit prior to adoption how they keep their flowers so beautiful and rarely does anyone say that they use pest sprays or bait. After 31 years of yard visits, we feel that those gardeners have good advice for the rest of us.



**Visiting Indoors** by Laney McLaughlin. Tortoises Photographed by Kids award from the 2007 Photo Contest. With Barney, Auggie, and Sean.

## MegaDiet Sales Online

Have you checked our website lately? You can buy MegaDiet and other tortoise and Tortoise Group items at [www.tortoisegroup.org](http://www.tortoisegroup.org). Members who pay dues annually use a Member Discount Code to receive at least 10% off on all items. A MegaDiet link presents names of Satellite Sellers, Tips on Offering MegaDiet, and answers many questions about how much to offer, when to feed tortoises, and gives links to helpful Information Sheets.

## Meet Board Member Laura Deitsch

Laura joined the Board almost two years ago following a general meeting at which she signed up for every single volunteer project. She has enjoyed her three torts, Spot (a desert) and Rocko and Buttercup (both Russian torts) for more than five years. "I was very particular in my choice of pets. I wanted something that didn't shed, make noise, whimper when I left, eat meat or other critters, and could be left alone for a day or two."

"I am really busy, but Tortoise Group has captured a little piece of me and I always make time to stay involved. Just one look at Spot and I melt. I shudder to think of how some people mean well but don't have the information to keep their tortoises healthy and well kept. I want to help get the word out – they all should be as healthy Spot."



Laura works as a health educator and is pursuing an advanced graduate certificate in community mental health counseling. She contributes to the Board with meeting facilitation skills and pitches in with great enthusiasm wherever needed.

----- Cut Here -----

### Tortoise Group Membership Form

A portion of memberships and contributions *should* be tax deductible  
Memberships are individual. They expire each December 31

#### 1. Please Print the COMPLETE address

Name (one name only please)

Phone

Address

City

State

Zip Code

E-mail

#### 2. Check One Newsletter Option      2008

- Send my newsletter in hard copy, and send meeting notices and other news by e-mail
- Send my newsletter by e-mail
- Send my newsletter in hard copy

#### 3. Renewing Member      New Member

( ) \$15   ( ) \$25   ( ) \$35   ( ) \$50   ( ) \$75   ( ) Life \$500

Special Contribution: \_\_\_\_\_

10% discount on MegaDiet and other Tortoise Group goodies to members and their immediate families

**Make check payable to Tortoise Group. Mail with form to:  
Tortoise Group ♦ 1201 S. Casino Center ♦ Las Vegas, NV 89104**

**Tortoise Group**  
**5157 Poncho Circle**  
**Las Vegas, NV 89119**  
**702-739-8043**

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The Tortoise Group newsletter is  
now published four times yearly:  
March, May, July, and September

**Spring Calendar for 2008**

**March 15 , Saturday - The Mojave Desert by Sharon Schafer - 1 pm**  
A photographic journey of the stunning beauty of the desert that  
surrounds us. These photos, sketches, and paintings are the basis of  
Sharon's exhibit currently hanging at the Museum. Details on page 1.

**March 29, Saturday - Native and "Tortoise" Plant Sale, 9 am - 5 pm**  
CSN Desert Garden Center, 6221 W. Charleston (just west of Jones)

**April 20, Sunday - Desert Tortoise Conservation Center - 9:00 am**  
Fabulous field trip outing! Learn the history of the DTCC and then tour  
the grounds to see tortoises of all sizes. Great opportunity to "talk  
tortoise" with others. Children welcome. Details on page 3.

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