

Tortoise Group Newsletter

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

Volume XX No. 3 July 2007

www.TortoiseGroup.org

Las Vegas, Nevada

Advertising Campaign to Begin

In partnership with Reliant Energy, on June 23 Tortoise Group will begin the first leg in a series of advertising to shout our name from the rooftops. We hope to reach those folks out there with tortoises who haven't heard about us, and especially those who aren't using MegaDiet. Listen for us on FM 106.5, 95.5, and 93.1.

And be prepared! Your friends who know you have a tortoise will all tell you they heard our spots. Please be an active part of this campaign to spread the word about proper and healthy tortoise care.

Photo Contest Adds Category

A special category, Tortoises by Kids, will add to our annual Photo Contest in September. Each adult (over 18) may submit **TWO** entries in each category of Tortoises Alone, Tortoise with Other Animals, Tortoises with People, and Non-Native Tortoises. Look for the complete rules in the September newsletter, or check the 9/06 newsletter.

Tips: Add a catchy or funny caption. Submit only photos showing safe tortoise behavior. A tortoise about to fall or walking down tall steps cannot be considered for a prize.

So crack out those cameras and capture those adorable moments for all of us to see. Winning photos are published in the newsletter and posted on the website (when we get our act together.)

It's Not Too Soon

Now is the time to get ready for hatchlings if you are still letting your tortoises reproduce. If you are still finding good homes for yours, that's wonderful. However, from the calls we receive, the results of poor housing and food are more numerous than you can imagine.

If you are new at this, now is the time to prepare the hatchling area. The little ones will need it ASAP after hatching. No indoor containers. Remember that we have the special roof tiles that just fit the 1-3 year olds. You will need two tiles per burrow and be prepared to pay a whopping \$3.00 each! Call Betty, 739-8043.

When your baby pen is ready, 5 x 20 feet minimum, you will want to transplant dandelions, so important for tortoises. For important information on transplanting see our website, tortoisegroup.org and use the link to Information Sheets on the home page. Click on #13. If you need dandelions, call Betty, 739-8043.



April field trip participants to the Large-Scale Translocation Site found the first tortoise resting under a shady creosote bush

Mojave Max Education Project 2007 Seeks Volunteers

Spend 3-4 hours per week teaching local elementary students about Desert Tortoises. Contact Stacy Irvin at 258-7097 or stacyma@msn.com.

New MegaDiet Seller at Rainbow & Alta

Please update your number for Kellie to 217-7796

MegaDiet Corner

New Tip on Introducing MegaDiet

Diane Henry has softened MegaDiet a bit more than usual in order to form it into nice long narrow fence. What a great idea! The tortoise can chomp right along the row. Of course it's good to be on hand to fix up a new fence when most of the MegaDiet is gone. With this technique, my tortoise eats every morsel. Please refer to the last several newsletters for other tips. Email your tips to Kathy at kutiger@earthlink.net



Tad eats along his MegaDiet fence like corn on the cob. Fence stays intact so he can easily eat it all.

The Time Has Come! By Betty Burge

Years have passed and I realize that many of you are still combining vegetables with the MegaDiet. By now most of your tortoises should be eating MegaDiet by itself with a large accompaniment of grass, ornamentals, dandelions, and the actual species that tortoises eat in the wild. Making these plants available is very important, especially while your tortoise is learning that you are serious about giving it the best possible diet based on MegaDiet.

“Store Bought” Vegetables

Unlike wild forage, a “store bought” vegetable diet is not nutritionally complete and 86% water.

- So even when you mix them with MegaDiet, they dilute the nutritive value of each meal.
- Even when mixed with MegaDiet, they create an imbalance in the nutrients in a given meal.

- They are high in potassium. People rarely get enough, but tortoises are challenged by potassium and must get rid of it because in excess it is toxic. Vegetables in the typical salad for your tortoise lead to abnormally high levels of potassium that the tortoise has to get rid of. **To do that, protein is needed and a long drink of water.**

So the more vegetables you offer, the more MegaDiet (a good source of protein) your tortoise must eat. If the protein in the diet is not sufficient, the tortoise breaks down its own flesh to rid the body of the excess potassium. Wild tortoises carefully select food plants that are low in potassium and high in protein.

You are not helping your tortoise by offering vegetables. Your tortoise seems healthy? They can function but be under par and you never know. How many times have you given up and offered your tortoises plain vegetables without any MegaDiet? That undermines the conversion to MegaDiet. Tortoises remember and hold out for plain vegetables. Give patience and “tough love” a chance.

Do you work and don't get home until late afternoon? You can leave pellets out in a shaded place. When you come home you can call your tortoise and feed it the flowers that it cannot reach. Place small juveniles on the grass and offer softened, moist, cool MegaDiet right there. A hungry tortoise will learn to come out when it hears your voice and the temperature is not too hot.

If you provide some of the plants we recommend, you can forget about the salad mixes and give the MegaDiet by itself. The sooner you do that, the sooner the tortoise will catch on. They all do, and you save time and money. The Community College of Southern Nevada's Desert Garden Center has been very cooperative in providing an increasing number of native food and habitat plants. See article on page 4. What fun I am having watching my tortoise take to these new species.

Need dandelions? I give them away. If you have questions about the information above let me know tortoisegroup@att.net or call me 702-739-8043.

Moving Time by Betty Burge

This seems to be a busy season for folks to move from Las Vegas. I have received quite a few calls from families with tortoises needing new homes. It is surprising to me how many of these tortoises have dug under the house, the patio, the storage shed or playhouse. These people are thankful that the Pick-up Service from the Tortoise Holding Facility will come for their tortoises and care for them. However, for tortoises living under substantial structures, the only way to have the tortoise ready for the Pick-up Service is to wait until the tortoise emerges on its own. As the ambient temperatures rise, the time tortoises spend above ground becomes shorter, making capture more difficult. Digging up the tortoise is rarely an option.

When we have heavy rains in late summer and during winter, the possibility of the burrow flooding is real. In summer the tortoise usually emerges to find those water puddles and to drink heavily. But in winter, a sleeping tortoise tends to remain under water, and drowning is likely. Becoming stuck in the mud is another possibility.

What is the bottom line? I think you know. Do not let your tortoise dig under a building, storage shed, playhouse or concrete slab. Provide a proper burrow as we suggest, because it is designed to protect the tortoise from the heat and the cold, and you will have access to the tortoise if you need to remove it for any reason.

Yes, digging a burrow is hard work, but if you provide your tortoise with a good burrow it will probably not try to dig in the wrong place. You can block a tortoise from digging in the wrong place.

Send Us Your Address Updates

Please remember to let us know when you change either your physical or your email address. It's an on-going challenge to see that you all receive our newsletters and other important information.

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
Summerlin, I-215 & Far Hills	Kathy & Pauline – 804-0472, 9am – 7pm
Rainbow & Alta	Kellie – 217-7796
Charleston & Rancho	Seeking volunteer
Tropicana & Maryland	Betty – 739-8043
Dean Martin & Blue Diamond	Carolyn – 876-0668, ext. 874
Green Valley, Eastern & Windmill	Ed & Pat – 269-7108
Henderson, Lake Mead & Warm Springs	Laurie – 558-6985 (after 11:00 am)
Henderson, Boulder Hwy & Equestrian	Gail – 334-0015 Cell
Boulder City, Utah & Adams	Patty – 293-7263
Pahrump	Sheri – 775-727-5557
Kingman, AZ	Toni – 928-757-8317
Mail orders	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**

Summer Meeting Schedule

When: Saturday, 1 - 3 pm

Where: Nevada State Museum and
Historical Society (in Lorenzi Park)
700 Twin Lakes Drive (see map below)

July 21 - Exploring the Bond between Tortoises and Humans

by **Karen Kampfer, PhD**

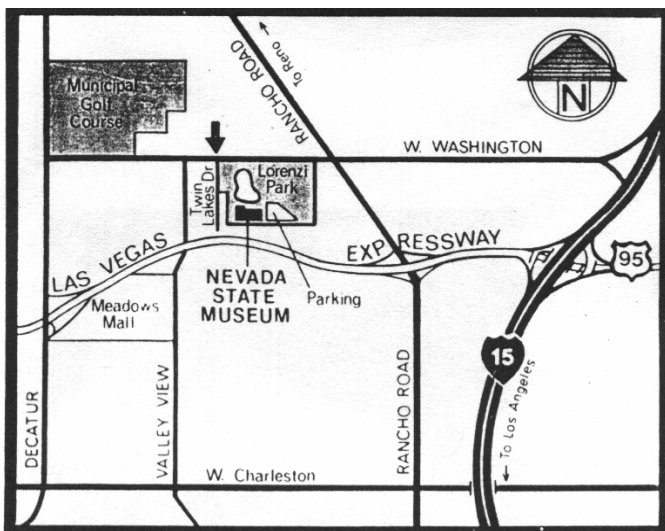
“How do I love thee, my tortoise?” Karen explores the unique bond between humans and animals and presents a summary of data from two questionnaires she distributed to Tortoise Group members and newsletter recipients in 1995 and 2003. Her PhD thesis, based on these exciting and heart-warming data, will be available to review at the meeting.

August 18 - How a Tortoise Works, Part II: Sex, Hatchlings, and Brumation

By **Betty Burge, M.S.**

Part II of Betty’s “can’t miss” two-part series on tortoise care describes preparation for hatchlings and their care. Late-summer tortoise behavior and preparations for brumation will round out the talk. Expect to learn a lot.

View Clark County’s two short DVDs on tortoise care before and after both meetings.



Desert Garden Center Tour

It was a gorgeous day for the May field trip of 49 members and friends to the CCSN Desert Garden Center for Native and Desert-Adapted Plants. A very special thank you to Greg and Char Cantwell for displaying directional signs to help us reach the garden center.

Beth Hewitt, tortoise biologist and horticulturist, germinates and tends the natives used for desert habitat recovery at the Henderson Facility. Her work was the topic of a highly informative PowerPoint presentation that morning.

We later joined overseer Cheryl, who manages the Charleston facility, for a guided tour of the research, seed germination, transplant, greenhouse, and cactus areas. Cheryl mentioned to Betty that she will be setting up an area of tortoise food and habitat plants. Thanks Cheryl!

Then it was off on a shopping spree, for we were treated to 20% off anything in the Center. We shopped, chatted, picked up brochures, and even went back to revisit some of the areas.



Group is led on tour of CCSN Garden Center

The Garden Center at 6221 W. Charleston is open Tuesday – Friday, 7am-3pm, Saturdays 8-5, closed Sunday and Monday. Call (702) 651-5050.

Dr. K's Kolumn

By Christine Kolmstetter, DVM
Cheyenne West Animal Hospital

Hello again! Summer certainly has arrived, and I hope everyone's backyard desert chelonians are doing well. As we discussed in our previous newsletter, the term 'chelonian' (keh-LONE-ee-yun) designates those reptiles with shells, which includes turtles, tortoises and terrapins. Just a short chat today to complete our discussion of some of the unique features of tortoise anatomy and physiology.

Probably the most obvious feature of the chelonian digestive system is the lack of teeth. The chelonian's toothless jaws are able to function very well due to powerful jaw muscles and the presence of a very strong 'beak.' In desert tortoises and other larger herbivorous land tortoises, the jaw coverings are deeply serrated and, combined with the scissor-like action of the jaw, enable these animals to bite off pieces of plants that are then swallowed whole. The salivary glands produce extensive mucus that allows the tortoise to comfortably swallow such chunks of food. All chelonians have large fleshy tongues which are not able to protrude from the mouth. Tortoises locate food both by vision and their strong sense of smell.



Tortoise has deeply serrated jaw coverings instead of teeth

The urinary tract of all reptiles, including tortoises, is very different from that of mammals. Chelonians such as desert tortoises have a need to conserve water, and they therefore produce very insoluble urinary wastes such as uric acid and other urate salts. These are passed from the body as a whitish material. Desert tortoises do have a urinary bladder which is important for water storage, particularly during times of drought. Water passes from the bladder into the body as needed. If you encounter a desert tortoise in the wild, you should never disturb the animal since they often release their bladder when they are picked up. Losing this source of internal water can result in severe dehydration and subsequent death in these wild tortoises.



Tortoise urine with chunky white urate salts and clear-to-purplish fluid

How do chelonians maintain their body temperatures? Chelonians are heliotherms, which means that they seek sunlight for heat. They typically bask in the sun to absorb the heat that they need for appropriate digestion. Once air temperatures become too high, they retreat to the comfort of their burrow. Sunlight is also extremely important because it provides the critical UV wavelengths needed for proper bone development and other physiologic processes. This is one of many reasons why desert tortoises should not be housed indoors. The desert environment is their ideal habitat.

Well, that concludes our brief discussion of some of the unique characteristics of our beloved desert tortoises! We will have a new topic for our final newsletter at the end of the summer. See you next time. Stay cool!

Thoughts from Betty Burge

Buying Exotics? Think Twice

One of the reasons that we do not adopt a male and female desert tortoise or adopt into a situation that will create a mating pair is because, in the small confines of a home yard that is something less than tens of acres, the female is continually harassed by the attentions of the male. She does not come out as often as she would if there was no male there, and therefore she does not eat as much as she should. Just recently we saw this behavior. Trying to collect the female without destroying her burrow took many days of watching and waiting. When the male and female were together in my home for a few hours he was attentive to the point of possible injury to the female, and I had to separate them.

I mention this also because the cute little “Russian” tortoise that is commonly for sale is even more sexually aggressive and is not very discriminating when it comes to which species he courts. So if you have a pair or a mix with a desert tortoise, count on having a very harassed and stressed female.

Another thought is about some species that you will need to keep warm in winter because they do not hibernate. These include the sulcata, leopard, and red-footed tortoises. What are your plans for building a warm room in your home with proper lights and heat source? If you are a parent, teaching your children humane treatment is an essential part of maintaining any pet.

Please think twice about acquiring an exotic unless you are prepared to find out about their year round needs from a reliable source. We can direct you to those experienced in proper care. Our experience with pet shops is that they do not have the best information and tend to encourage you to buy equipment for an indoor existence which is inappropriate for tortoises at any age unless you are providing for our winters when you have a non-hibernating tortoise.

Warning

Several times a year we discover that a great deal of preparation for a tortoise has turned out badly. We know of three recent instances. Persons misrepresenting Tortoise Group or convincing the client that they know how a habitat needs to be prepared have produced unusable results. This has meant that important features such as the burrow and/or the fencing required starting from the beginning.

If you have prepared your yard for your tortoise, including digging the burrow, you know how much work is involved. Considering the time and effort involved, to use the word “unfortunate” when you see that you will need to start over, is a major understatement.

Tortoise Group Adoption Committee members are willing to go through the details of preparation whether you adopt from us or another source. Our service is free. The well-being of the tortoise is our primary goal. Why not take advantage of our service and get it right the first time? Although we have written a pamphlet full of details to help you, we have found that success is not always assured that way. Many of us have trouble with written directions. That is why we go over the preparation with you in advance and are available for followup at any time. Save time, money, and your tortoise. Call 739-8043 or email tortoisegroup@att.net.



Johann Meyer holds coyote jawbone found on field trip to the Large-Scale Translocation Site.

A Great Moment!

By Elise McAllister, Partners in Conservation

On April 28, members of the Mesquite Middle School's Girls Basketball Team were installing tortoise fencing along a section of highway. Several kids came running – "Quick, come look at this!" A tortoise was literally digging under the existing fence as they were working on that section! The group's coach said, "See kids, this is exactly why we are installing this fence. Without the barrier, this little guy would walk over to the free-way and BAM—he'd get run over and be a goner! By getting up at 5 am and coming out and doing this work, you have saved this little guy's life!"

The girls were very excited, but also, in a neat way, almost reverent. And wonderfully, it was common knowledge that "you're not supposed to touch a tortoise or move them." We backed off and let him alone for a while. They skipped the area where the

tortoise was and kept on working. Half an hour later he had actually inched a little further under the fence, so I picked him up and moved him back 20 feet under a creosote. You couldn't script a moment like that—it was too cool!



Tortoise fencing will save this tortoise's life

----- 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

- 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**

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

Calendar for 2007

July 21 - Exploring the Bond between Tortoises and People

Heart-warming results from questionnaires completed by Tortoise Group members and friends show the unique bond we share with our tortoises and other animals.

August 18 - How a Tortoise Works, Part II: Sex, Hatchlings, and Brumation

Betty Burge presents her second "can't miss" talk on tortoise care.

September 15 - Photo Contest, Annual Meeting, Ice Cream Sundaes

Brief annual meeting followed by the exciting photo contest. Ice cream sundaes for all. See more about the photo contest on page 1

October 21, Sunday - Springs Preserve Tour

Guided 2-hour tour of the fabulous new Las Vegas site for family and friends. Special price. Look for details and sign-up in the September newsletter.

Please refer to page 4 for program details

Material submitted to the Tortoise Group Newsletter becomes the property of Tortoise Group and may be edited before printing.

Printed on recycled paper

