



# Desert Tortoise Council

## Five-year Strategic Plan and Implementation Strategies 2015-2020

CONSERVING  
DESERT TORTOISES  
AND THEIR HABITATS

Approved February 9, 2015

<p><b>Mission</b></p>	<p>To assure the perpetual survival of viable populations of the desert tortoise represented throughout its historical range</p>
<p><b>Five-year Vision</b></p>	<p>To be the premier organization advocating for science-based conservation of desert tortoises, and to be a leader in the recovery and protection of desert tortoises and their habitats</p>
<p><b>Membership</b></p>	<p>Membership is open to any person or organization with an interest in desert tortoises or desert tortoise conservation</p>
<p><b>Current Functions and Services</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To host annual symposia to disseminate scientific and conservation information regarding desert tortoises</li> <li>• To provide professional development through workshops on desert tortoise ecology, field techniques, and regulatory protections</li> <li>• To review and comment on proposed projects that may impact desert tortoise populations and habitats</li> <li>• To provide funding for implementation of small-scale conservation projects</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategic Goals</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To be the primary resource for credible and current scientific information about desert tortoises through hosting annual symposia and training workshops</li> <li>2. To engage, assist, collaborate with, and provide guidance to agencies and other organizations to support the conservation and management of desert tortoises and their habitats</li> <li>3. To grow, engage, educate, and energize a diverse membership and the public to support desert tortoise conservation efforts</li> <li>4. To facilitate projects that demonstrate the implementation of successful recovery techniques, land acquisition, conservation research, and other recovery programs through funding, collaboration, and other means of support</li> <li>5. To provide structure and opportunities for long-term funding of the Council through a robust fund-raising program</li> <li>6. To strengthen the organizational integrity of the Council and its Board of Directors</li> </ol>

**Background and Context**

The Desert Tortoise Council (Council) and its Board of Directors (Board) have succeeded for 40 years in bringing information about the desert tortoise and threats to its conservation to scientists, managers, and the public through the Annual Business Meeting and Symposium. In addition, the Council has hosted workshops providing basic information on tortoise ecology, field techniques, threats and mitigation solutions, and regulatory protections for more than 25 years. However, as of 2015, tortoise populations throughout the Mojave Desert continue to decline, and increasingly more habitat is being lost to authorized development and unauthorized uses. Land and resource management agencies are unable to match conservation to the pace of development due to limited staff and budgets. Threats to desert tortoises have never been greater; action is needed now. With this Five-year Strategic Plan, the Board is responding to these challenges by expanding the Council’s efforts to achieve desert tortoise recovery.

Strengths	Weaknesses/Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 40 years of success</li> <li>• The Council and Board are dedicated to conservation of desert tortoises</li> <li>• Expert knowledge of desert tortoises, desert ecology, and application of regulations</li> <li>• Successful history of hosting symposia provides a forum for outreach to members</li> <li>• Successful techniques workshops provide training for tortoise biologists and others</li> <li>• Active Ecosystems Advisory Committee provides review of and comments on proposed projects</li> <li>• Available funding to support small-scale projects</li> <li>• Initial progress in developing advanced workshops, formalizing Board policies, publishing a Newsletter, and utilizing social media to increase the Council’s profile and educate the public</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An all volunteer Board limits available time to address important issues</li> <li>• Limited expertise in legal issues, fundraising, social media, and the administration of a nonprofit organization</li> <li>• Limited communication between Board and general membership outside of symposia</li> <li>• Failure to involve general membership in Council functions and decisions by the Board</li> <li>• Communication among Board members is often challenging; limited number of Board meetings delays decisions and actions</li> <li>• No formal procedures for transfer of knowledge and function from long-term Board members to next generation</li> <li>• Funds are insufficient to support large-scale projects</li> </ul>

**Council Goals for 2015-2020**

**Goal 1: To be the primary resource for credible and current scientific information about desert tortoises through hosting annual symposia and training workshops**

As knowledge expands on the biology, ecology, conservation, and management of desert tortoises, it is important to disseminate this information for use by all those interested in the continued survival of desert tortoises. However, despite many detailed studies, the compilation of results, and the development of specific conservation/management techniques, effective dissemination of this information is generally lacking. Preparation of issue-driven “Best Management Practices” and standardized protocols that are based on scientific research could facilitate implementation of conservation actions by land and resource managers, developers, and others. This approach may also help to identify gaps in knowledge.

*Strategies:*

- a) Continue to host annual symposia and increase the number of participants
  - b) Develop and conduct training workshops including:
    - Introduction to desert tortoise ecology and management
    - Advanced handling techniques
    - Health assessment
    - Survey techniques for Morafka's desert tortoise
  - c) Provide ready access (compliant with copyright laws) to scientific literature, agency reports, and regulatory/compliance documents relevant to the desert tortoise
  - d) Develop "Best Management Practices" to provide specific guidelines on the management of the tortoise and its habitat including:
    - Tortoise habitat restoration
    - Habitat connectivity
    - Translocation
    - Captive tortoise management
    - Disease management
    - Maintenance of genetic diversity
    - Terms and Conditions
    - Subsidized predator management
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**Goal 2: To engage, assist, collaborate with, and provide guidance to agencies and other organizations to support conservation and management of desert tortoises and their habitats**

The ultimate responsibility for recovery of desert tortoises lies with land and resource management agencies. These agencies implement environmental compliance regulations and manage a vast acreage of desert tortoise habitat. However, the resources available to these agencies are often limited, and the decisions made may be confounded by conflicting demands and political agendas. The Council can assist these agencies in making "informed decisions" by working in conjunction with the agencies and providing accurate information on which to base management decisions. It is through the actions of the Council that the tortoise has a "voice," which should be considered in agency decisions.

*Strategies:*

- a) Maintain an active Ecosystems Advisory Committee that reviews and comments on proposed developments, land management, and other actions potentially affecting desert tortoises
  - b) Provide training to both the Board and general members on the most efficient ways to review project documents and the most effective ways to comment on projects
  - c) Provide representation on agency committees, work groups, recovery teams, and other forums that provide decisions/recommendations affecting desert tortoises or their habitats
  - d) Increase the Council's visibility at meetings and hearings
  - e) Engage legal counsel as needed
  - f) Provide funding to leverage additional funds from agencies to achieve specified tasks
  - g) Partner with other conservation groups to strengthen position statements
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**Goal 3: To grow, engage, educate, and energize a diverse membership and the public to support desert tortoise conservation efforts**

Strength comes from numbers. A large Council membership of people willing to engage political, management, and regulatory entities can demand accountability and effect change. Effective communication by the Board with the Council membership is required to provide information about actions that can be taken for the benefit of desert tortoises, and to support Council activities. Educating the public at large will additionally provide strength in attaining political will for desert tortoise conservation.

*Strategies:*

- a) Expand our membership base by embracing all interests relevant to desert tortoises and conservation of desert ecosystems (e.g., husbandry, pets, zoological, conservation, research, academia, students, land acquisition and management, regulatory protection, and general public interested in desert tortoises)
  - b) Develop a Strategic Membership/Marketing/Communications Plan that includes, in part, communicating to lapsed members
  - c) Provide a process for the membership to support Council activities and functions, to be notified of important projects where assistance is required, and to serve on committees
  - d) Develop a consistent voice and messaging approach
  - e) Survey the membership to determine what type of membership benefits are important to them (e.g., special access to tortoise literature, interaction with other professionals, job postings)
  - f) Communicate success stories, and acknowledge the people that are making a difference for tortoise conservation
  - g) Provide timely notice of information on current research and issues of conservation concern relevant to desert tortoises
  - h) Be a “hub of communication,” keeping membership informed of current tortoise related issues
    - Utilize up-to-date Membership Database
    - Website
    - Newsletter
    - Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, blog)
    - Organize opportunities for members to interact
  - i) Solicit member input for the newsletter, website, photographs, etc.
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**Goal 4: To facilitate projects that demonstrate the implementation of successful recovery techniques, land acquisition, conservation research, and other recovery programs through funding, collaboration, and other means of support**

Coordinated implementation of actions that benefit desert tortoise conservation is critical for maintaining and recovering desert tortoise species. These actions may involve developing scientific information that is useful in supporting conservation actions, reducing threats, or conducting field surveys. The results of these actions will help ensure the use of the best available scientific information in making management decisions.

Despite millions of dollars spent on Agassiz’s desert tortoise recovery efforts, this species continues to experience population declines throughout most of its range, and in some areas very severe declines. Though the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s recovery plan may provide a comprehensive assessment of threats to Agassiz’s desert tortoise and identify actions needed to recover the species, implementation of these actions are often piece-meal or non-existent. Successful recovery may require implementing a

succession of management actions for the same tortoise population to address a sequence of threats and management conflicts. The source(s) of the problem(s) must be identified; what needs to be done to address the problem(s) must be understood; and the proper techniques and knowledge of how to implement the action must be available. But of course, this also requires funding, the land base, permits, the will to take action, and a prolonged commitment to accomplish all tasks.

*Strategies:*

- a) Provide funds to projects that demonstrate successful conservation actions
  - b) Expand the Grants Program, providing funds for meaningful proposals to address current tortoise research needs and management issues
  - c) Collaborate with land trusts to suggest Best Management Practices for their lands
  - d) Identify and adopt a demonstration area where all actions are taken for the benefit of desert tortoises (attain full implementation of all Best Management Practices)
  - e) Assist agencies in implementing a full-spectrum of desert tortoise recovery actions at a landscape-level scale, with an emphasis on Agassiz's desert tortoise
  - f) Provide funding for or otherwise facilitate land acquisition efforts that are critically important for long-term persistence of desert tortoises
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**Goal 5: To provide structure and opportunities for long-term funding of the Council through a robust fund-raising program**

It takes money to run an organization. It takes considerably more money to fund implementation of desert tortoise recovery actions.

*Strategies:*

- a) Identify specific funding goals and provide funds for implementing specific projects or to attain specific goals
  - b) Continue to expand the "rainy day fund"
  - c) Consider hiring a professional fundraiser to develop a Strategic Fund Raising Plan to reach specific funding targets
  - d) Produce issue-driven promotional videos
  - e) Host and effectively manage symposia and workshops to achieve sustainable income to support Council activities
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**Goal 6: To strengthen the organizational integrity of the Council and its Board of Directors**

The ability of the Council to facilitate ultimate recovery of desert tortoises is dependent on the continued, long-term function of the Council and its Board. To ensure that the Council will remain engaged over the extended period needed for recovery requires commitment by a succession of individuals willing to accept responsibility for continuing the Mission of the Council. Persons of diverse skills, knowledge, background, and experience provide an array of perspectives for solving problems, and joining together provides a strong voice to advocate for desert tortoise recovery. Clear operational policies implemented by the Board provides for efficient administration of the Council, consistent decision-making, and continuity of values over the long-term.

*Strategies:*

- a) Expand the diversity of Board membership with varied backgrounds, expertise, and experience (especially expertise in environmental law and fund raising) to assure the long-term continuity of the Council and its governing Board
  - b) Develop policies and procedures to improve operational efficiency and guide consistent decision-making
  - c) Mentor new Board members to assume increased responsibility in the operations of the Council and Board, and to facilitate transition of leadership
  - d) Improve communication among Board members (consider adding a Board meeting between February and June; consider additional 1.5-day meetings as necessary; conduct conference calls as needed; use email correspondence as necessary to conduct important business, particularly when voting by the Board is required)
  - e) Reassess, as needed, the roles and responsibilities of officers, and the functions of standing and ad hoc committees; continue to develop position descriptions for all Board positions and committees
  - f) Provide new Board members with orientation documents/handbook to familiarize them with Board member responsibilities, the procedures and policies of the Board, and how they can contribute
  - g) Provide training for Board members concerning the Board's fiduciary responsibilities, and ethics/conflict of interest issues
  - h) Provide instruction on how to be effective in communicating with agencies and political representatives
  - i) Consider the need for a part-time paid executive director
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**Strategic Planning Process**

This Five-year Strategic Plan is the result of a two-day retreat attended by the presiding Board of Directors, facilitated *pro bono* by Solution Strategies International, Inc., and held in Wrightwood, California, June 7-8, 2014. The overarching goal of the retreat was to develop a unified vision for the future of the Council. Prior to the retreat, the facilitators conducted a confidential interview with each Board member. From these interviews, common themes and concerns were identified that formed the discussion topics for the retreat. Numerous challenges and limitations were discussed. Priorities were established to strengthen the operations of the Board and to achieve the Mission of the Council. The discussions and consensus reached during the retreat are documented in the "Desert Tortoise Council – Retreat Summary Report, June 7-8, 2014", prepared by Solution Strategies International, Inc.

Participants in the Strategic Planning Retreat

Solutions Strategies International, Inc.

Linda Mitrovich                      Heidi Brannon

Board of Directors

Scott Abella	Kristin Berry	Maggie Fusari
Becky Jones	Cristina Jones	Jason Jones
Ed LaRue	Ken MacDonald	Chris Noddings
Bruce Palmer	Joe Probst	Mari Quillman
Glenn Stewart	Michael Tuma	Peter Woodman