

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

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EDITORIAL

OUR VIEWS // Tortoise time

Off-road driving privileges end where an endangered species' habitat begins - at least when that habitat rests on federal land. It's perfectly reasonable to regulate how public lands are used; that's just good stewardship. A federal judge last week ordered the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to ban off-roading in desert washes in two federally protected wildlife areas in Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial counties. At issue is the fate of the desert tortoise. The areas will remain closed until biologists decide what effects, if any, motoring has on the threatened reptile. The findings are expected by the end of February.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club say off-road vehicles crush tortoises and their burrows and spew pollution that harms the reptiles' fragile ecosystem.

Off-road enthusiasts are upset, and understandably so. Their hobby has come under assault by environmentalists and officials who would like to see off-road vehicles banned from federal land altogether.

That's unreasonable. But a temporary ban to complete a study isn't. And even if the 572,000 acres covered in the court's ruling remain closed - as they should if biologists agree that the machines harm tortoise preservation - off-roaders still have access to 1,700 miles of trails nearby - covering 1.7 million acres.

That should be space enough to satisfy off-roaders who understand the need to nourish the natural habitat that helps make the Inland region special.