

## LETTERS: A new tortoise plan will save reptiles from usFROM OUR READERS

### To the editor:

Your Wednesday editorial, "A tortoise tale," at least got the facts partially correct. The military's plan to capture and move nearly 800 desert tortoises is required by law for the expansion of [Fort Irwin](#)'s tank-training facility. The relocation has resulted in the deaths of dozens of animals already teetering close to extinction.

Sadly, the tragedy was totally predictable. The relocated tortoises were placed into an area of poor habitat suffering from two years of drought, which has illegal off-road vehicle use, trash dumping and residential developments. Coyotes, also suffering from drought, have proved to date to be the deadliest threat to tortoises who are still trying to make their way back to their home territories and were left above ground with no burrows to hide from the predators.

It is for these reasons that the [Center for Biological Diversity](#) is likely to pursue a lawsuit against the Army, the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) and the [Bureau of Land Management](#) for their truly ill-conceived and harmful plan. The plan needs to be improved before the next relocation is implemented, where even more tortoises will be moved. The tortoises desperately need it.

The body of your editorial missed the mark regarding the issue of cattle grazing and its impacts on tortoise habitat and survival. All leading tortoise scientists agree that cattle grazing and tortoises don't mix -- and Clark County and Fort Irwin have actually bought out local cattle grazers and gotten rid of the cows to protect desert tortoise habitat as an additional way to offset the impacts of development.

You mention the hypothesis espoused by Vernon Bostic in 1990 that it was the lack of cow pies for tortoises to feed upon that was causing their decline in the Mojave Desert. At the time, it was an interesting theory, but subsequent research by H.W. Avery and Todd Esque involving tortoise feeding patterns found very little use of any kind of dung, and even less of cow pies specifically. M.B. Allen researched the nutritional value of cow dung and found it to be deficient for the survival of tortoises. So, yes, in a drought year, a tortoise may now and again take a bite of a cow pie, but like you and I, it does not prefer such a diet and will not long survive on it.

Loss of quality habitat from urbanization, wildfires and grazing, motorized recreation, illegal dumping, disease, and predation from ravens whose populations have been bolstered by human impacts remain the greatest threats to the desert tortoise.

But first and foremost, the continued existence of the desert tortoise comes down to conserving adequate and secure quality habitats to allow for the flow of genetic material among individual populations.

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