

Gopher Tortoise Council



Gopher Tortoise Conservation Position Statement

For more information regarding the gopher tortoise and the Gopher Tortoise Council, please visit our website:

www.gophertortoiseCouncil.org

The Gopher Tortoise Council (GTC) was formed in 1978 by a group of southeastern biologists and other citizens concerned with the decline of the gopher tortoise. Since then, the GTC has supported numerous conservation, education, and research projects focused on gopher tortoises and upland ecosystems. Much progress has been made for tortoise conservation, including the end of legal harvest of tortoises throughout their range, but some threats, such as habitat loss and modification, remain unchanged since the inception of the GTC. In addition, new issues in tortoise conservation have been identified including disease, relocation, and incidental take.

The purpose of this document is to outline the current position of the GTC on measures to be taken for tortoise conservation. The GTC is considered a source of this information because it collectively represents over two hundred scientists, land managers, and concerned citizens. Although this position statement is designed to be an evolving document, changeable in response to new research, information and regulations, it is important to synthesize the collective expertise of GTC members into a document that clearly states the application of research to the real-world issues facing the gopher tortoise.

1. Habitat Conservation

The first and most important component of gopher tortoise conservation is to conserve and manage remaining upland habitat, including the wetlands that are a part of the complete ecosystem. We also advocate restoration of upland habitat that has been degraded by intensive silviculture, mining, destruction of native groundcover, and fire exclusion. Much research has been conducted with the goal of evaluating the proper management guidelines for upland ecosystems, particularly longleaf pine habitats, including gopher tortoises and other upland species. Thinning of pines, prescribed burning, removal of exotic plants and animals, and replanting of native groundcover are all components of appropriate management of gopher tortoise habitat.

2. Research and Education

The GTC recognizes the need for both basic and applied research related to conservation of gopher tortoises and their upland habitats. Specific research needs include questions related to habitat management, habitat fragmentation, demography, disease, genetics, and experimental restocking (see below). The GTC also promotes education and outreach activities to enhance public awareness of issues related to tortoise conservation, as well as providing information for politicians, land managers, and other decision-makers.



3. Relocation

Relocation (translocation) is the deliberate movement of wild gopher tortoises to fulfill a conservation need or to remove individuals from impending harm. The goal of translocation for conservation purposes is to enhance severely depleted gopher tortoise populations or to reestablish extirpated populations; these planned movements are also referred to as restockings or repatriations. Relocation is a controversial management strategy because of the potential to spread disease, mix genetically different populations, the loss of burrow commensal species, and the potential low site fidelity of relocated tortoises. In addition, many tortoise populations on development sites are relatively small and are probably do not represent a significant contribution to the long-term persistence of this species. However, collectively the number of tortoises affected by habitat loss is large and in Florida, the only alternative to translocation has been incidental take. Incidental take allows tortoises on a development site to be sacrificed in exchange for the developer contributing toward purchase of habitat elsewhere. This alternative is ethically unacceptable to many GTC members and we therefore advocate on-site habitat protection, on-site relocations, use of displaced tortoises for restocking efforts, and use of humane relocations wherever possible.

Careful consideration of the conservation benefits and potential detriments of translocating tortoises led us to develop the following recommendations:

- Public or protected private uplands (e.g., in the Florida Panhandle) that presently have no resident tortoises or severely depleted tortoise populations (e.g., from past human predation) would benefit from well-planned, appropriately funded, and well-executed translocations (restockings). Similarly, we would support the consolidation of isolated individuals (e.g., in Louisiana or Mississippi) to protected lands meeting the same criteria noted above. Any restockings should be conducted initially as experimental translocations from which researchers and managers could glean useful data and insights.
- From a conservation perspective, translocations of displaced gopher tortoises from development sites to recipient areas that have existing populations of tortoises in unmanaged (or poorly managed), unprotected habitat only give the illusion of benefiting the species and are therefore not advocated.
- We cautiously support the translocation of individual tortoises for humane purposes into previously-designated county or local lands with suitable, unoccupied habitat, under well-planned circumstances. Although the conservation value to the species would not be the driving force here, such local alternatives could help prevent unauthorized relocations of tortoises to premier conservation lands. Such translocations, given the right circumstances, can provide excellent opportunities for public education and outreach.
- Health profiles, as specified by wildlife veterinarians, should be conducted on translocated tortoises, and site fidelity should be enhanced by placing tortoises in adequately sized temporary fenced enclosures.

Geographic and possible genetic concerns must be considered in translocations. In these cases, the conservation value to this keystone species should be the driving force.

