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## Saguaro National Park News Release

*For Immediate Release*

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Contact: Don Swann at (520) 733-5177

### Give a Hand to Desert Tortoises

Desert Tortoises are now in their most active season. Nearly everyone loves tortoises, but the growing number of people and pets living in the Tucson area brings increased risks to these slow-moving symbols of the Sonoran Desert. Saguaro National Park, the Friends of Saguaro National Park, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, University of Arizona, and others have teamed up to spread the word on the best ways to help protect tortoises in the wild.

Should you encounter a wild desert tortoise, please **do not** remove it from its habitat. "People think they are doing the animals a favor by taking them home," said Don Swann, a wildlife biologist with Saguaro National Park, "but it is usually harmful to the tortoise." Taking a wild tortoise home is not only illegal in Arizona, but the animal will die if it is not well cared for, and the tortoise could be harmed by the family dog. Most tortoises stay in the same small area their entire lives, so moving one to a new location can be detrimental because the tortoise will not know where to find food and shelter.

If you do come across a desert tortoise crossing a busy road, you can be of great help. Keeping traffic safety in mind, experts recommend picking the tortoise up and gently moving it to the other side of the road. Carry it so that it is level to the ground, and move it in the same direction it was headed.

In contrast, if you have a desert tortoise that you have been keeping as a pet at home, please **do not** release it into the wild. Biologists are particularly concerned with the occurrence of Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD), which is associated with significant declines in tortoises in the Mojave Desert and may be caused by infected captive tortoises coming in contact with wild tortoises.

If you want to share your yard with a desert tortoise, Arizona residents may legally adopt a tortoise through the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Tucson office or the Department's Adobe Mountain Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Phoenix. Tortoises may also be acquired from a state-sanctioned adoption facility such as the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson.

Finally, local veterinarians are seeing increased wounds on desert tortoises caused by domestic dogs. Keeping dogs on leashes or in fenced yards is an effective way of reducing their encounters with tortoises as well as with potentially dangerous wildlife such as rattlesnakes, coyotes, and javelina.

Saguaro National Park is working this year with the Arizona Game and Fish Department ([www.azgfd.gov](http://www.azgfd.gov)) and Friends of Saguaro National Park ([www.friendsofsaguaro.org](http://www.friendsofsaguaro.org)) to educate high school students about tortoises and their conservation. Interested teachers should contact Park Biologist Don Swann (contact information above).

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Additional background:

Desert tortoises are estimated to live as long as 50 to 100 years. Adults are generally about 10-14 inches in length. Desert tortoises are most common in the rocky foothills surrounding Tucson, but these areas are also popular places for people to live and are being rapidly developed. While the desert tortoise has been named a Threatened Species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in areas of California, Nevada, Utah and Northern Arizona, tortoise populations are healthier in southern Arizona and the tortoise is not threatened here. However, the species is protected throughout Arizona.

Desert tortoises in Arizona are considered a species of special concern and Commission Order 43 prohibits taking desert tortoises from the wild. The Arizona Game and Fish Department also lists desert tortoises as Restricted Live Wildlife, which means they cannot be imported into or exported from the state. Federal law also precludes transportation of desert tortoises across state lines.

Details about how to prepare your yard to adopt a desert tortoise can be found at: <http://desertmuseum.org/programs/tap.php> (for Tucson) or [http://www.azgfd.gov/w\\_c/desert\\_tortoise.shtml](http://www.azgfd.gov/w_c/desert_tortoise.shtml) (for Phoenix, Kingman or Yuma).

Other contacts:

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