

THE GOPHER TORTOISE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE (GTCl) REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES OF 2001- 2002

The Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative (GTCl) is a program of Ashton Biodiversity Research & Preservation Institute, Inc., a non-profit 501-C3 organization. The primary goal of GTCl is to provide advice, training, and assistance to members who are stakeholders in tortoise and uplands conservation and who are decision makers for lands with tortoise habitat or other protected species. The GTCl program has been active for nearly two years. The following is a summary of its activities.

GTCl Staff and Volunteers

The GTCl staff is made up of Ray and Pat Ashton, a number of volunteers, and a student intern Coordinator. There are approximately 30 volunteers currently active. GTCl provides a stipend for the Coordinator and pays instructors and other workers under contract for various activities. Professionals are tapped to teach portions of courses and review informational documents. These include Joan Berish, Rebecca Smith, J.R. Hand, Brad Smith, Julie Morris, David Gordon and the Ashtons

GTCl Workshops, Training Courses and Programs

1. Internships

Since 1997, the Institute has provided Internships to 24-post graduate and undergraduate students from 9 countries and 14 different institutions. These are students who have come to work in sustainable tourism development or to participate in tortoise research and conservation. Of these, GTCl has supported 5 students over the past year and a half. These students assist in all aspects of GTCl and learn how a small conservation organization works. Eleven students have been hired to help instructors and to participate in various training programs. More than \$6000 was provided by GTCl toward internships.

2. Tortoise Conservation Fact Sheets

GTCl has produced seven 2- page informational sheets directed to specific stakeholders in tortoise management and conservation. The Ashtons have produced 9 other more in depth "how to" materials for distribution. More than 10,000 of these handouts have been mailed, emailed or sent to individuals across the state in the past year. Some of these materials have been available by downloading from the Institute WebPages.

3. Community Tortoise Stewardship Program-GTCl's Answer to the Tortoise Wars

The Community Stewardship program is designed to train volunteers in subdivisions where build out is causing tortoises to be destroyed (usually without permitting) on properties, to work with builders and landowners to manage the tortoises on their properties. The Institute holds the relocation permit and the volunteers are trained thoroughly to survey, trap, and handle and move tortoises on to the Sugar Mill Woods Green Space (approx 1400 acres). There are two groups made up of approximately 20 volunteers. They average 3 property reviews per week and they moved approximately 50 tortoises in the past year. At least 5 newspaper articles have been written and several television interviews or programs have been done on the groups work. At least 10 communities and several builder groups have asked for similar programs. However, there is not enough staff time to answer this demand at the current time.

4. Courses

Based on a marketing survey done by our interns and information from other sources, it was decided to develop several educational programs to serve professionals who were involved in tortoise management and conservation. It was also decided that since the Gopher Tortoise Council and George Heinrich are actively working with pre-college students and teachers, that these audiences would not be considered. Course fees are set based on costs and on a minimal number of participants. Fees generated above costs go to other non-fee producing programs.

The following are workshops that were offered in 2001 to July 2002 and the number of attendees:

TITLE	LENGTH of PROGRAM	NO. OF SESSIONS	NO. PARTICIPANTS
Field Management Methods and Techniques	3 days	6	96
Tortoise Natural History for Animal Rehabbers	1 day	8	8
Tortoise, Habitat, and Preserve Management and Monitoring	1 day	3	32
Staff and Volunteer Training for Partner Organizations	½-1 day	4	200 (approx)
Lectures, field trips for Conservation, Civic, and Herp groups	1-2 hrs	11	800 (approx)
Presentations at Professional Meetings	20-30 min.	3	250
Total		35	1,386

5. Partners

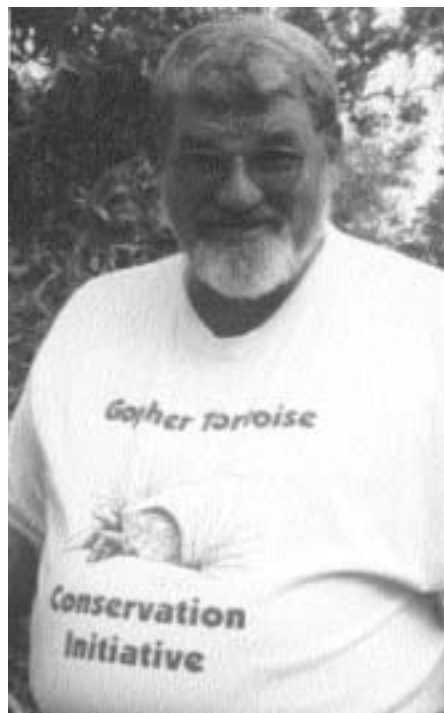
It has become obvious over the past year that there was a need to work cooperatively with other conservation organizations to fulfill the needs of their members as well as to have convenient locations around the state to offer programs. GTCI has begun to work cooperatively on tortoise management and conservation projects with these partners. Partners include 4 County Governments, Florida Wildlife Federation, Conservation Law Clinic, UF Law School, Florida Nature Conservancy, Sanibel-Captive Conservation Foundation, and several local chapters of Sierra Club and local herpetological societies. The programs offered for and with these organizations are included in the course summary.

6. Membership

Very little time has been devoted to generating more membership in the GTCI program; for the most part new members come to us. GTCI is a program and not an organization and its purpose is education and conservation. Program membership fees help to pay for programs listed above. The current 300 members receive discounts on courses, information about tortoises and upland conservation issues and help with community tortoise and conservation problems.

7. T-shirts and Fund Raising

GTCI members and volunteers have been helping with displays at various meetings and with T-shirt sales. The T-shirt design modeled by Ray was donated by an enthusiastic GTCI volunteer and supporter (Holly). The funds from the T-shirt sales support other GTCI activities. The Tortoise design on the T-shirt and GTCI Reserve sign was done by famous illustrator David Dennis who now lives in Sarasota, Florida.



8. Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program

The Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program was developed in conjunction with the Tortoise Reserve Program operated out of North Carolina (headed up by David Lee) which has several hundred thousand acres of land in the US and other countries that have been designated by the landowners or managers as areas where resident chelonians will be protected. GTCI has more than 20 reserves ranging from 5 to several thousand acres that total nearly 68,000 acres in the GTCI Tortoise Reserve Program. The Florida Nature Conservancy has the largest acreage followed by Lee County, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, and several private landowners. GTCI provides information on proper management of tortoise habitat in natural and non-natural habitats, management plan assistance to helping develop management plans and monitoring programs. Each program is provided with one or more Tortoise Reserve Signs.

9. Advice and Assistance

GTCI provides assistance to cities, counties, and individuals related to developing policy, managing and monitoring lands, and assisting in providing ways to solve problems with tortoise conservation. GTCI has worked with the South Florida Conservancy, Collier, Lee, South Florida Water Management District, and others over the past year. Many graduates of the professional level classes call frequently to discuss issues on tortoise management with projects or problems with the FFWCC guidelines. GTCI has made comments to FFWCC regarding changes in tortoise conservation. GTCI has conducted informal polls on such things as the experience and training of professionals involved in tortoise management and how they conduct projects. In a recent poll, GTCI found that up to 170,000 tortoises are moved by private citizens annually within the state of Florida.

The Future

GTCI must maintain itself financially. This must be done through fees generated in providing programs and materials, memberships and grants. At this point, the current staff and budget restricts the growth and the ability to respond to people's needs who are contacting GTCI daily for help with immediate conservation programs, to join the Reserve Program, or to get local conservation programs and courses underway. At this critical time, we need professionals to help teach programs, groups and individuals to assist with providing assistance to the general public whose concern for the loss of habitat and tortoises is growing by the day. We are also looking for donations, grants and other financial support. GTCI needs your help.