

# **GOPHER TORTOISE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE™**

## **FACT SHEET FOR LARGE LAND OWNERS & MANAGERS**

**The Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative (GTCI)** is a proactive program to encourage and support private citizens, landowners, individuals, corporations, scientists, and governments that are concerned about or are interested in gopher tortoise and upland wildlife conservation in the state of Florida. As part of this program, a major effort is being made to work with private landowners to become an important part of the conservation of gopher tortoises across the state.

### **THE GOPHER TORTOISE RESERVE PROGRAM**

**Any land can become listed through this program as a Tortoise Reserve simply by the landowner agreeing that land use and management on their property will be done in a fashion that will attempt to protect gopher tortoises and other upland species and their habitat.**

**The Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program is part of The Tortoise Reserve, Inc. (P.O. Box 7082, White Lake, NC 28337). Thousands of acres of private and public land in a number of states and at least six countries have signed on to this program to protect habitat of a large number of turtle and tortoise species.**

### **WHY IS GTCI CONCERNED ABOUT THIS GROUP?**

GTCI believes that private landowners are the key element in long-term conservation in the state of Florida. Historically in highly developed parts of the world, the private landowner has often made the difference between the extinction of a species or its survival through massive land use changes. Many uplands that are managed by state agencies are being destroyed by the lack of management or in some cases changing natural areas into dense silviculture or other uses that reduce natural biodiversity. Many biologists feel that we need more than just the large state forests and parks to insure that many upland species survive as the state develops. There is a need for many smaller lands scattered across the various regions of the state that are not under the management of the state. In other words, don't put all your tortoise eggs in one basket.

### **I AM NOT A TORTOISE LOVER SO WHY JOIN?**

Many of the landowners that GTCI has worked with are not tortoise lovers. Many of them are interested in wildlife, such as deer and turkey. Many large landowners have their land in timber, some in ranches or farms while others live on property that has good upland woods. We encourage people to join the Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program because what is good for gopher tortoises is often good for all other upland wildlife, including game species. We can help to develop land management plans that benefit wildlife and at the same time keep the profit in what you have been doing on the land.

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### **If I protect tortoises, will it increase my liability?**

If you develop a plan to manage your habitat or simply leave the tortoises and other wildlife alone and their population increases, you can limit any liability you may have if you are going to develop land in the future. If you have a ranch, farm or forest, you fit under the rules pertaining to agriculture and changing from one agricultural use to another is usually exempt. If you were going to develop the land, then it would be wise to develop a plan and apply for a Safe Harbor Agreement with FWC (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission). This limits your mitigation liability to the number of animals counted at the time the agreement is made. GTCI can help you with information on creating a Safe Harbor Agreement or can recommend an expert to help you.

### **Is there any benefit for me to manage for tortoises?**

Yes, there may be direct or indirect benefits. There may be a number of ways in which management for uplands and tortoises could be beneficial to your current endeavors or for your long-term land use plans. You may be eligible for some financial and professional advice as part of the state's Forest Stewardship Program or as part of the FWS Wildlife Habitat Conservation Program. In some circumstances you may be eligible for the state or county to purchase a conservation easement and, there may be some tax breaks as well. GTCI can help you with information on creating a Forest Stewardship or Habitat Conservation Plan or can recommend an expert to help you.

### **What is involved in Management for Tortoises?**

This varies, but if the property is pinewoods, it is important to have some open canopy and some grasses and plants on the ground for tortoise forage. Controlled burning is important. If it is a farm, avoiding direct harm to the tortoises is important, such as running over them in vehicles, or allowing domesticated animals like dogs or pigs to eat them. Tortoises survive well in Bahia pastures, especially along fencerows. Specific suggestions on management vary with the land use, in many cases what you have been doing will work fine. GTCI has worked with cattle and horse ranches and knows some of the special problems these people have with tortoise burrows. There are a number of ways to manage for both large animals and the gopher tortoise that have worked successfully.

### **How can GTCI be of assistance?**

GTCI will do a cursory site visit for members (see membership benefits sheet). This site visit will give member landowners a general idea of what species they may have on the property and suggest some possible methods of mitigation. GTCI can possibly provide other services to the landowner or developer depending on the situation. GTCI is developing a list (to provide to members) of environmentally friendly biological consultants, land clearers and other service providers that work with gopher tortoises and other uplands species. These people will have completed GTCI workshops or demonstrated appropriate practices on projects in the past.

**All lands in the Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program will receive one metal Tortoise Reserve Sign (see membership category benefits sheet) and can purchase others.**