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# **GOPHER TORTOISE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE™**

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## **FACT SHEET FOR SMALL LAND OWNERS & NEIGHBORHOODS**

**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.**

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

### **WHY IS GTCI CONCERNED ABOUT SMALL LAND OWNERS?**

GTCI believes that private landowners including owners of small parcels of land such as in subdivisions 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.

### **WHAT CAN I DO?**

If you are a small property landowner who is concerned about saving the neighborhood tortoises, then GTCI can help. If there are tortoises or tortoise burrows on your land or other lands in the neighborhood these tortoises will have certain needs and face certain dangers. You can help protect these tortoises and their burrows and help educate others in your neighborhood to do the same. GTCI can help you accomplish this. You can also become part of the Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program, joining with thousands of other landowners worldwide to protect turtles and tortoises and their habitat.

### **WHAT DO I DO WITH TORTOISES ON MY LAND?**

Whether you have a small lot or are part of a large subdivision with open lands, you may find tortoises or tortoise burrows if you are in the right kind of habitat for tortoises, usually upland pinelands or old pasture habitats. You may not have to do anything other than

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## **PAGE 2 - Fact Sheet for Small Land Owners**

continue to manage the habitat properly for the tortoises if you are not implementing any land use change or clearing the land for building.

Tortoises are grazers, like cows, and they will need sufficient healthy green grasses and other herbaceous plants to eat. This means that they will probably travel beyond the boundaries of your yard or perhaps even beyond the general neighborhood if the areas are not fenced. When entire neighborhoods are suitable for tortoises and landowners work together to protect their tortoises, the populations can be quite healthy. The greatest dangers faced by these tortoises are dogs, cats, and cars.

If there is a vacant lot in your subdivision the tortoises may choose to burrow there where there is less activity or disturbance. This creates new concerns if that land is then to be cleared for building. Any land use change or clearing for building may be a cause for concern as such activities may result in the death of tortoises or the destruction of burrows.

### **What will happen to the resident tortoises? (PROTECTION OR DESTRUCTION?)**

There is no clear-cut answer to this question because within the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Guidelines there is enough flexibility that many landowners can either choose to help protect these tortoises or simply destroy them with the proper permits. A PERMIT (from FWC) IS REQUIRED TO MOVE OR REMOVE ANY GOPHER TORTOISES OR TO IMPACT OR DESTROY THEIR BURROWS. Normally permits are not issued to small landowners to take local tortoises that are becoming refugees from land clearing and building. However, it is possible – contact GTCI for more details on the permitting process.

### **How can I save neighborhood tortoises? BECOME A TORTOISE RESERVE!**

Many reports to FWC of tortoises in danger of being bulldozed or killed during construction come from neighbors. If the tortoise or tortoises in danger are on neighboring or near by property, then you may want to contact FWC or GTCI about options for helping these tortoises for humanitarian or educational reasons. Some landowners may wish to have neighborhood tortoises that are in danger relocated (with proper permits) to their property if it has suitable habitat and make their land a gopher tortoise reserve.

While a few individual tortoises can survive happily within developments if there is sufficient appropriate habitat, they do not really comprise a successful breeding population. This does not mean that protection of individual tortoises is unimportant, simply that it is important for different reasons than protection of breeding populations. The species as a whole most likely will not be helped by saving isolated individuals but these individuals serve other purposes such as for education and in the future they may even be important for breeding as part of an "Assurance Colony". A worldwide network of "Assurance Colonies" may someday be the only source of breeding stock for certain endangered tortoise species though this is not currently the situation for the gopher tortoise in Florida.

### **How do I become a Gopher Tortoise Reserve?**

To join the Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program first you need to have tortoises present or the willingness to develop your land to sustain tortoises in the future. There are certain minimal requirements for membership into the Gopher Tortoise Reserve Program and to receive a permit from the state for moving or accepting any tortoises. These requirements generally include the amount and type of habitat (usually 1 acre minimum), the amount of tortoise forage available (need ¼ acre per tortoise), and landowner commitment to manage the property appropriately for sustaining the tortoise or tortoises. The GTCI staff will help members to evaluate their land or situation, discuss the various options available and help with the application to become a Gopher Tortoise Reserve. (see attached membership form)