

Desert tortoise trials and tribulations

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By Leslie Shaw Hi-Desert Star



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Rae Packard used slides in her presentation. This slide is demonstrating the correct way to move a desert tortoise.

Desert Tortoise Rescue director Rae Packard was the lecturer at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum Wednesday, but the real stars came out after the lecture, when Packard took out a 70-year-old female tortoise who is up for adoption and a 104-year-old male named Master Uguay.

Sponsored by the Morongo Basin Historical Society, this was Packard's farewell lecture at the museum, as she is moving to Yuma, Ariz., in two weeks.

The rescue started when Packard moved to the Hi-Desert and lost her pet desert tortoise Cecil when a meter reader left her gate open. A young boy found Cecil and when she paid him his reward, he told her he was going to save the money for college because he wanted to become a turtle veterinarian. "And he actually did grow up to be a turtle vet," said Packard. The Desert Tortoise Rescue was founded shortly after.

Using slides, Packard educated attendees on the different illnesses and injuries suffered by the desert tortoise. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a fatal disease called upper respiratory disease syndrome killed about 90 percent of the desert tortoise population. Tortoises with the respiratory disease will have weak front legs and swollen eyes, Packard said.

There is good news for the species, however: UCLA, the U.S. Geological Survey and the Marine Corps have begun a study to determine if the disease is passed from a mother to her offspring through an eggshell. Early test results show that the disease does not pass the barrier to infect the babies.

“This was very good news; we can soon begin releasing babies into the wild population,” Packard explained.

Packard shared more tortoise facts with the audience. When desert tortoises are frightened, she said they void their bladders as a defense mechanism. The urine is a dark, viscous liquid that smells very bad. Unfortunately, Master Uguay was frightened and he messed his crate, treating the entire room to the rank odor.

Desert tortoises can live up to 18 months on a full bladder. The desert tortoise spends 90 percent of its life underground in its roomy multi-room burrow. When it rains, it comes out, digs a divot in the sand and submerges itself in a few inches of water, hydrating itself enough to see it through until the next rain.

“If a desert tortoise voids its water in a dry season, then it will dehydrate and die,” said Packard.

There are times when it is appropriate to move a desert tortoise and Packard demonstrated the proper way.

“If you find a desert tortoise in the middle of a trafficked road or other dangerous place, then you should move it. First approach the tortoise and politely introduce yourself, then pick it up no higher than about a foot off the ground and slowly carry it off the road and release it. If the tortoise does void its bladder, it should be brought to the rescue for rehydration,” said Packard.

Packard’s move from California will not mean the end of her rescue program. Desert Tortoise Rescue will be run in the future by Heaven’s Gate Large Animal Rescue operator Heidi Sanders, and Packard took the opportunity to introduce her to the group during the lecture.

“When they approached me about running the rescue, I was delighted to be a part of it,” Sanders said. “I have 3 1/2 acres in Flamingo Heights just off Old Woman Springs Road. We are making 8-by-8-foot separate enclosures for the tortoises.”

At the end of the lecture, museum director Stefanie Ritter came forward and said, “We have to stop having these tortoise lectures because every time we do someone drops off another tortoise.” Sure enough, a male desert tortoise was dropped off during the lecture. They put him down next to Master Uguay and the two immediately began aggressive posturing. “They usually only fight over mates in August and April. The males do fight to the death,” explained Packard.

For information about the tortoise rescue or to find out about adopting a desert tortoise, visit the website at www.deserttortoiserescue.org or call (760) 490-2818.