



PUBLIC LANDS RESOURCE UPDATE

July 1988

Confrontations between endangered species and human projects have become all too common in this day and age, especially in California, the fastest growing State in the Union. However, in the Coachella Valley, BLM and other cooperators forged an innovative solution that is serving as a model to others. This Update describes that success story.

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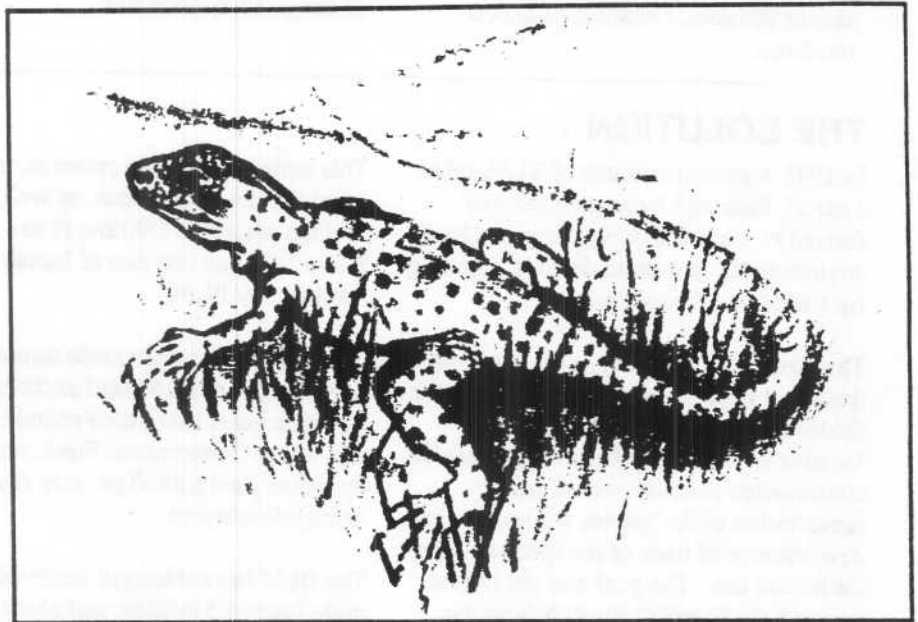
State Director

Did You Know?

- There are 19 species of animals on BLM public lands in California considered threatened or endangered.
- The Federal Endangered Species Act prohibits the "taking" or harming of any of these species.
- This protection applies to the species' critical habitat as well.
- Lands near Palm Springs are habitat for the threatened Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard.
- A cooperative preservation project worked out by BLM, other agencies, organizations and developers in the Valley has resulted in a preserve system for the lizard.
- This cooperative approach has been so successful, BLM and others are applying it to a similar situation in the Carrizo Plain in Kern County.

COACHELLA VALLEY PRESERVE

Preservation and Progress



Palm Springs, within the Coachella Valley, is known world-wide for its luxurious lifestyle and stellar celebrities. The little creature above, called a Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, may not look it, but it is a celebrity in its own right, due to the fact that it is a "threatened" species, protected by Federal law.

The lizard and its human neighbors in the Coachella Valley were not long ago engaged in a classic story of progress versus preservation that threatened both the lizard and the growth on which its human neighbors thrived.

But due to the cooperation of public agencies and private organizations, this story has a happy ending, a "win/win" solution that is serving as a model for similar confrontations throughout California and the West.

The key players, in addition to the lizard, included the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; The Nature Conservancy; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the California Department of Fish and Game; Coachella Valley Association of Governments; Coachella Valley Water District; Agua Caliente Indian Tribe; Coachella Valley Ecological Reserve Foundation; local land developers; and private donors.

The result of their joint efforts is a 13,000-acre preserve lying 10 miles east of Palm Springs in the California Desert and two satellite areas that are permanent refuges for the fringe-toed lizard and a number of other rare or unusual species. The complex is jointly owned and managed by the BLM, The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the California Department of Fish and Game.

THE PROBLEM

For thousands of years, particles of sand from the nearby San Bernardino Mountains and Indio Hills have been washed and blown into the Coachella Valley, forming a dunes system that is home to a variety of wildlife and plants. Among these are the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, which depend on the wind-blown sand dunes, covering some 200 square miles, for survival.

In the early 1940s, the human population of that area was about 12,000 people; by the 1980s, the population had grown almost 20 times, exceeding 220,000 residents.

THE SOLUTION

In 1983, a joint committee of BLM, other Federal, State and local agencies was formed to work with developers and local environmental groups to develop a strategy for addressing the problem.

The Nature Conservancy, a private group dedicated to preserving natural areas, took the lead coordination role in bringing together all the parties to develop a habitat conservation plan that would ensure preservation of the species while allowing development of parts of the species habitat for human use. The goal was not only to preserve the lizard's critical habitat, but also a buffer area and a major source of blow sand on which the species depends.

THE FUTURE

Long-term management of the area is to be funded from the trust fund established with the developers' fees as well as some taxpayer funds. A full-time caretaker employed by The Nature Conservancy lives at the site, and a BLM ranger provides law enforcement protection.

This project's success provides a blueprint for land management agencies faced with similar problems. BLM and The Nature Conservancy, in addition to cooperating in other smaller projects in other parts of the State, are well underway on an even larger effort in the Carrizo Plain in Kern Co.

This rapid development encroached on the habitat of the lizard and the free-flowing sand that sustained it.

By October 1980, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the lizard as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. Due to provisions of the Act which prohibit the "taking" or harming of any threatened species, the listing of the lizard created an adversary relationship between developers and cities in the Coachella Valley and State and Federal agencies responsible for enforcing the Endangered Species Act.

This includes the main preserve, managed jointly by the cooperators, as well as two satellite preserves (Willow Hole-Edom Hill and one east of Indian Ave.) managed by BLM.

The acquisitions were made through a combination of BLM land exchanges and land purchases using the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, private donations, and a \$600 per acre fee paid by nearby developers.

The BLM has exchanged lands valued at more than \$4.5 million, and about 95 percent of the preserve is now owned by one of the cooperating agencies.

This area encompasses about 180,000 acres of grasslands that are the last large remnant of a vast system that historically existed in the San Joaquin Valley. It provides the support system for nine species of threatened or endangered animals and three species of plants.

It lies just west of one of the most productive oilfields in California. Enhancing and preserving the wildlife habitat in the Plain will allow development of the nearby critical oil resources.

A NATURAL SELECTION

The Coachella Preserve is not only home to the fringe-toed lizard, but a host of other species as well. In fact, more than 180 species of wildlife, including four others considered rare, can be found there. These are: the Coachella round-tailed ground squirrel, the giant red velvet mite, the flat-tailed horned lizard, and the giant palm-boring beetle.

The area also provides unique Desert habitat for 25 birds, including Gambel's quail, American kestrel, greater roadrunner, burrowing owl, cactus wren, poorwill, cedar waxwing, and northern mockingbird.

In addition to the blow-sand dunes that are critical to the lizard's survival, the Coachella Preserve also contains several palm oasis woodlands. These pockets of water and vegetation are the result of the area's geological structure that allows water flowing underground to rise to the surface.

In fact, the preserve straddles the San Andreas Fault and is situated north of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains and south of the Little San Bernardino Mountains.

These oases, particularly the spectacular Thousand Palms Oasis within the preserve, provide unique habitat for the wildlife there. The Thousand Palm Oasis gets its name from the more than 1,200 native California palms found there.

Other vegetation in the area includes creosote bush, encelia, burrobrush, smoke tree, and desert lavender.

This special combination of natural features has resulted from the heavy rains that for thousands of years have washed sand and gravel from the nearby hills into the valley. The area's strong winds have blown the sand into dunes, which are constantly changing, providing habitat for a diverse group of wildlife and vegetation.

For more information on the Coachella Valley Preserve, contact:
BLM's Indio Resource Area, 1900 Tahquitz-McCallum Rd, Suite B1, Palm Springs, telephone (619) 323-4421
or Coachella Valley Preserve, P.O. Box 188, Thousand Palms, telephone (619) 343-1234.