



A desert tortoise is ready to crawl into the southern Nevada desert, part of a massive relocation project for the threatened animals.



LOCATION: Las Vegas, Nevada

ANIMALS ASSISTED: Special-needs desert tortoises

ONE HAS A DEFORMED SHELL. Another had been kept in a closet by a previous owner. Several are missing limbs.

For years, these once-neglected tortoises have found sanctuary at the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center on the outskirts of Las Vegas. But with the facility scheduled to close this year because of federal budget cuts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has asked The HSUS for help rehoming the special-needs animals.

In June, 16 will be transported to The Kerulos Center in Oregon, where an HSUS-administered grant is helping the facility build its first of several geodesic domes to house the incoming residents. Each tortoise will have his own burrow, plus native cacti, wildflowers and even roses to eat and a barn for winter hibernation. A trust will fund their lifetime care. “Our primary goal is to rescue and provide sanctuary for these individuals,” says Kerulos director Gay Bradshaw. “But we’ll also be using this as an opportunity to promote education as to who reptiles really are.”

Since 1980, Mojave desert tortoise populations have declined by 90 percent in some areas; only an estimated 250,000 still survive in four southwestern states. About 900 live at the Nevada center, which opened in 1990 for conservation purposes and to receive tortoises displaced by development after the species was listed as threatened. In 1996, the facility began taking in unwanted desert tortoises once kept as pets. By 2009, some 3,500 resided there.

Healthy tortoises continue to be released onto carefully selected

lands. But with the center closing, some can’t be placed in the wild: tortoises with transmittable diseases and others who would not survive because of disability, like missing limbs or damaged shells.

The animals’ biology complicates the task of finding placement, says The HSUS’s Dave Pauli: “These tortoises are 6 months to 20 years old, and they can live to be 80. Not a lot of sanctuaries want to take on that responsibility.” Still, thus far, he’s secured commitments from 11 facilities.

On one early May morning, with temperatures in the high 50s—perfect for releasing tortoises into their native habitat—staff and volunteers from the center and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service drove into the southern Nevada desert. Mesquite trees, cacti and shaggy-looking Joshua trees dotted the sandy landscape. Snow-covered mountains loomed in the distance.

Carrying plastic bins with tortoises inside, small teams fanned into the desert. Each hiked about a mile from the road before releasing its first tortoise, stopping every hundred feet or so until the bins were empty. When someone noticed a tortoise from a previous release, hope seemed almost palpable for the nearly 70 being set free that day.

“It’s really neat to help such a unique species,” says Pauli, noting they live in an unforgiving climate and eat vegetation in a place where that is often hard to come by. They’re also a keystone species, providing cover for other animals with the burrows they dig. “Definitely worth saving.”

▶ TO SUPPORT the relocation project, visit humanesociety.org/deserttortoise.