

Tortoise Conservation in Southern Utah

A proposal from Black Desert Resort

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Introduction

Black Desert Resort is a destination resort located in Washington County, Utah. It occupies 600 acres, which includes nearly 200 acres of natural landscape set aside as a conservation area. The Resort has a strong commitment to environmental awareness and education. For example, Black Desert Resort has partnered with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) to have a population of Virgin River Chub, a federally listed Endangered Species in one of its lakes. Another project is in cooperation with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food; we are creating pollinator gardens to

support federally listed Monarch butterflies and other protected species. We have enlisted classes from Utah Tech University to conduct long term studies of water quality and invertebrate populations in our 5 lakes. We are also developing an internship program for the training of UTU students.

Conservation Plan for Mojave Desert Tortoise

As we are adjacent to the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, we think it appropriate to assist the Mojave Desert Tortoise through education programs and other efforts involving the surrounding communities and guests of the Resort. To that end, we will create a Nature Center that will be focused on public education and supporting these and other environmental projects. The overarching goal is to help the public develop an understanding of their role in the conservation of tortoises and their habitat. To do this, we seek to obtain at least four live tortoises that will support a program of meaningful learning experiences for our guests and visitors.

Our design plans for the facilities are fluid in that we want to follow the guidance of those working with captive tortoises. Black Desert Resort is prepared to create indoor and outdoor displays to house desert tortoises that will ensure their well-being and provide viewing opportunities for the public. We envision an indoor viewing habitat similar to that at the Washington County Building. A second, outdoor area would be in a natural setting with native plants and terrain. Security will be a primary concern.

I have worked with wild tortoises in California, Arizona, and Utah for 20 years. We intend to hire whatever staff are necessary to care for the animals in our charge. This may include one of several local herpetologists who have expressed interest, or interns from UTU. It may be possible for the Resort to cover part of the costs of a DWR employee who oversees their care. We intend to meet the tortoise care standards outlined by the Utah DWR and US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Translocation and Population Augmentation

A more proactive conservation program we would like to develop is supporting the DWR and HCP's translocation efforts. We would like to assist in the delayed translocation of newborn tortoises that come through the County HCP. Hatchling tortoises enjoy no parental protection, and their soft shells do not protect them from ravens, coyotes, roadrunners, and other predators. By providing one or two years of safe habitat for young tortoises, Black Desert Resort could substantially improve the survivability of wild born tortoises. This year alone, 8 tortoises were born at the HCP holding facility in Confluence Park, and another two hatchlings were discovered in a take area just outside the Reserve. These naturally occurring young



could be housed in safe conditions and kept active during the winter months to speed up their growing process. This would allow them to more quickly develop hardened shells before being returned to DWR for their eventual translocation back into the Reserve.

Since many Reserve lands already support healthy tortoise populations, we think our efforts might be more useful in underpopulated areas, such as Beaver Dam Wash or the Shivwits Reservation. Black Desert would cover all costs for

the program, asking only that we can tell the story to the public in a manner that promotes local tortoise recovery efforts.

Request for Partnership with the HCP and Utah DWR

We are in contact with the Ivanpah Desert Tortoise Research staff and local scientists working with captive populations with a similar mission in California. We feel that a proactive effort to increase the survivability of hatchling tortoises is a logical part of our conservation vision and would complement the County's efforts to reduce the raven population. We have the funding, space, and ability to support these additional tortoise conservation programs to assist UDWR, the HCP and USFWS in their recovery efforts of this threatened species. We seek only the permits and access to newborn tortoises acquired by the HCP and UDWR. We offer complete transparency and cooperation with the various entities involved. Facilities needed for any or all of these programs can be constructed before the Spring of 2025.