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Conserving South Carolina's At-Risk Species:

Species facing threats to their survival

Gopher tortoise

(*Gopherus polyphemus*)



Gopher tortoise / USFWS

Description

The gopher tortoise is a large, terrestrial turtle with spade-like front legs that are an adaptation for digging and hind legs that are elephant-like. The carapace of the gopher tortoise can vary from brown to dark gray. Carapace length averages 25.4 to 30.5 cm (10 to 12 inches) for adults; maximum length is approximately 38 cm (15 inches). The carapace of the adult tortoise is generally dull and unmarked. Adult tortoises can weigh up to 4.5 kg (10 pounds). The head of a tortoise is square in profile with a flat, blunt nose.

Range

In South Carolina, the gopher tortoise has been reported from the sandhills and inner coastal plain ecoregions of the following counties: Aiken, Allendale, Bamberg, Barnwell, Colleton, Dorchester, Hampton, and Jasper. Native reproducing populations are currently known from three different areas: the sandhills along the South Edisto River in Aiken County; the sandhills along the Coosawhatchie River in both Jasper and Hampton Counties; and in the Tillman Sand Ridge Heritage Preserve, along the Savannah River in Jasper County.

Habitat

The gopher tortoise is a fossorial, burrowing species that primarily inhabits xeric longleaf pine sandhills in South Carolina. Historical tortoise habitat would consist of longleaf pine in an open, park-like stand with a lush ground cover dominated by wiregrass (*Aristida stricta*) and a variety of herbaceous plants. A sparse understory would have been composed of scrub oaks. The deep, droughty sands of such habitats provide the ideal substrate for the excavation of the tortoise's burrow. Adult tortoises may excavate a burrow that can be from 3 to 9 m (10 to 30 feet) in length; at its deepest point the burrow may be 3 m (10 feet) underground. An individual tortoise may excavate several such burrows over its lifetime; it may also take over and utilize burrows excavated by other tortoises. Tortoises typically use more than one burrow during the active period of the year, but typically over-winter in only one burrow.

Status

The gopher tortoise is legally protected throughout its range as follows: Georgia – state threatened; Florida – state species of concern; Mississippi – state endangered and federally threatened; Alabama – state protected, populations west of the Tombigbee and Mobile Rivers – federally threatened; Louisiana – state and federally threatened. The gopher tortoise is currently listed as state endangered in South Carolina; state ranking of S1—critically imperiled and global ranking of G3—vulnerable.

Threats

Currently, the primary challenge to the gopher tortoise is habitat loss, either through direct means, such as type conversion to loblolly plantations, agriculture

or development; or through indirect means, such as fire suppression that results in successional changes that render the habitat unsuitable for tortoises. Direct threats to habitat may cause immediate mortality or result in displacement into unsuitable habitats. Tortoise populations have been historically adversely affected by take or harvest as it was collected for food throughout the southeast prior to its range-wide protection. Gopher tortoises have also been confiscated when found for sale as pets. While adult tortoises have few predators, juvenile tortoises are predated by a wide array of animals, including foxes, raccoons and snakes. Additionally, armadillos have become established in South Carolina and may pose a threat to tortoises by modifying existing burrows and potentially predating tortoise eggs.

Management/Protection Needs

Continue to inventory and monitor known populations. Protect all gopher tortoise sites identified through land acquisition or conservation easement. Conduct landowner workshops on gopher tortoise protection. Encourage property owners, especially owners/operators of public lands to conduct fire management operations to further enhance gopher tortoise populations. Continue gopher tortoise life history research and repatriation/relocation research.

References

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources—State Wildlife Action Plan: 2010-2015.

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