

Desert Managers Group
by Mark Wheeler for the DMG
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“No single agency can do it all,” Russell Scofield states simply about the need for an organization like the Desert Managers Group (DMG). Scofield is the Habitat Restoration Coordinator for the DMG, and what his comment observes as a matter of practical fact with respect to the DMG’s enormous geographical area of influence, it also declares as a matter of principle with respect to the enormous challenges involved in managing so much area for the purposes of so many different interests.

The DMG is a partnership of federal, state and municipal land-use management agencies that includes representatives such as the U.S. Departments of Defense, Interior, and Agriculture; California Departments of Fish and Game, Transportation, and State Parks; and Kern, Imperial and San Bernardino Counties. Its sphere of influence is the California desert region comprising an area of 25 million acres, and its service mandate is to bring these agencies together in a shared mission to pursue their various goals according to a plan which helps them all uphold the highest conservation ethics in their work.

Originated as a collaborative effort in 1994 between the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service to help both agencies coordinate their respective responsibilities for the newly instated California Desert Protection Act, the DMG was officially chartered in 1999. With the goal to help its member groups achieve greater operational efficiency in their service to the public and to the protection of resources, the DMG has devoted itself to a comprehensive management plan for developing and implementing guidelines, practices and programs that address a wide range of responsibilities from conservation and protection to visitor use and education.

Speaking to the mixed nature of DMG’s membership, Desert Tortoise Outreach Coordinator Anne Staley noted that, “even though the agencies may have various individual land-use agendas, they all have common ground in their shared mission to manage the desert environment in a way that preserves its wholeness and diversity.”

As a practical example of these coordinated efforts, Scofield noted that many DMG members have applied themselves over the years to desert tortoise recovery efforts within their own boundaries. However, as he further observed, such independent efforts are of limited service to the species as a whole because they tend to isolate recovering groups to small areas.

“We need a range-wide effect,” the coordinator declared and went on to explain that everyone’s contribution to and cooperation with the DMG’s regional planning allows recovery efforts to be better monitored across the entire desert region, while at the same time making it easier for every land-use group to carry out recovery programs on their own lands more effectively. Furthermore, he went on, range-wide efforts help to maintain habitats and linkages between habitats which are so necessary for satisfactory distribution of the species within its historic range.

Interagency working groups are organized within the DMG to pursue its priority goals and objectives. These consist in a large variety of target interests such as data management, desert information resources, desert lands restoration, science, and

wilderness, to name just a few. As each working group proceeds with its action plan, the information gathered is shared among members and also published for others to see.

Defenders of Wildlife, a nationally based non-profit organization “dedicated to the protection of all native wild animals and plants in their natural communities,” is both a working and a funding partner with the DMG. Having matched a federal grant for the DMG’s education and outreach program, the Defenders group has worked with other DMG members to, among other things, help educate the public about desert tortoise biology and about the recovery efforts being made for its sake.

California Representative for the Defenders Cynthia Wilkerson praised the DMG for its interagency approach to such difficult tasks as desert lands management and especially public education. In doing so, she proved by description just how diverse the DMG membership is by naming the California Association of 4 Wheel Drive Clubs as an important distribution group for materials on responsible recreation. Natural Resource Consultant for the clubs John Stewart echoed Wilkerson’s comments about the DMG and the need for education, adding that: “It’s going to take a coordinated effort by all parties. Together we can create solutions.”

Among the DMG’s recent achievements, it announced completion of a draft document for riparian habitat restoration. Titled *California Desert Riparian Challenge: A Strategic Plan for Restoration of Riparian Habitats in the California Deserts*, the plan identifies 17 important desert watersheds and outlines funding requirements and priority planning for supporting their restoration.

Working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the DMG has helped support review of the 1994 Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan and is contributing to the plan’s revision. In addition, the DMG has established an education and outreach program for increasing public awareness about desert tortoise recovery that is being implemented through the cooperation of a remarkably wide range of agencies and interest groups.

Within the group’s five-year work plan are detailed objectives for continuing its desert tortoise recovery work, as well as its continued work with riparian area restoration, illegal dump eradication, and wild burro management, to name just a few. In keeping with its mission, all goals for the five year plan uphold the group’s imperative to facilitate successful desert lands management and provide a means for recording and disseminating information on planning, science, and education.