

Mojave Max Program
by Mark Wheeler for the Desert Managers Group

In light of research evidence revealing that the desert tortoise could very well be extinct within the next 50 years if current conditions of impact remain unchanged, the species has never needed Mojave Max more urgently than it does now.

Originated in Nevada by the Clark County Desert Conservation Program, Mojave Max is an ambitious campaign designed to increase understanding about how desert ecosystems work and especially how the desert tortoise and other indigenous organisms are affected when ecosystem stability is undermined.

Max himself is an icon, a character with identity and personality who program originators hope to invest with the kind of recognition-status enjoyed by Smokey the Bear. They want Max to speak as effectively for the importance of knowing why our desert environments need our help as Smokey does for knowing how to prevent forest fires.

In California, the program is being launched this year by the Desert Managers Group (DMG), a collaborative partnership of local, state and federal agencies responsible for the management of public desert lands. Relying heavily on education outreach to achieve many of its goals, the DMG is developing Mojave Max as an activity-based curriculum package for third through sixth graders that is designed to satisfy state standards for science and social science requirements for those grades.

Emergence Contest

Hooking children's interest right from the very start, the program begins with a little suspense, a guessing game called the Mojave Max Emergence Contest. At this point children learn that Mojave Max the icon is also a very real tortoise that lives in the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area near Las Vegas. They also learn that real tortoises take shelter in their burrows for the winter, sleeping in a hibernation-like state called brumation.

Science is still not certain what inspires any individual tortoise to emerge from this winter nap when it does, but the researchers, and the DMG and Clark County people, do know for a fact that every tortoise does emerge sooner or later in the spring. Guessing the day Mojave Max comes out is the object of the contest.

Naturally, any youngster's guess is improved with some basic knowledge about the desert tortoise. For instance, the student might want to know what the weather was like when Max emerged in previous years. He or she might also want to know what tortoises do first when they emerge from their burrows, and whether they're hungry after sleeping so long and, if they are hungry, what foods they especially like.

Guessing smart

This is where the program's curriculum component takes center-stage. The DMG group has assembled this information into what it believes is a very user-friendly package. It will meet teacher needs for smooth delivery and, just as importantly, will meet student needs for age-appropriate material that is interesting and fun. As an extra bonus, the program comes at no cost, except for shipping.

Packaged neatly in a trunk container, the lessons and activities are scheduled for one-half to one-hour activities over a five-day period. The third and fourth grade curriculum focuses on tortoise biology and habitat, while the fifth and sixth grade students will explore the causes and effects of impacts on the species. In time, the program developers intend to offer more detailed units for higher grades, expanding the subject with new lessons exploring a wider range of desert science subjects.

Lorna Lange-Daggs, education specialist for Joshua Tree National Park and education coordinator for the DMG, will have two prototype trunks available for testing in southern California schools by fall 2006. Working with a National Fish & Wildlife Foundation Grant, she will eventually produce two trunks each for the two age groups. In addition, the project outline calls for producing a compact disc of program related data and information in both English and Spanish, assembling an archive of tortoise science materials, staging workshops in use of the program, and launching a media campaign.

Going public

Plans are for the school program to eventually mature into a regional public awareness campaign with increased opportunity for people of all ages to meet and learn about Mojave Max, and to learn about the desert environment.

"Our approach," Lange-Daggs explained in discussion about the DMG's ultimate goal, "is to not only raise public awareness about critical desert issues, but to also give people the information they need to put that awareness to use."

Through the Mojave Max program, and its expanded public awareness campaign, DMG members want to help guide people into discovery of a new and more informed appreciation for the desert and the way it works. In this way, they hope, there will always be a Mojave Max emerging somewhere from his burrow in the spring for generations to come.

Local groups or businesses can help sponsor the Mojave Max program in their communities by donating prizes for the class of the Mojave Max Emergence Contest winner. Please contact Anne Staley at (760) 367-5528 you wish to become a Mojave Max sponsor.