

Taxonomic Change for Desert Tortoise

Talking points

- The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been managing desert tortoises as a single species with two distinct populations on each side of the Colorado River based on differences in genetics, life history, and habitat preferences. These tortoises have been referred to as the Mojave population of desert tortoise and the Sonoran population of desert tortoise.
- A new study announced June (xx) confirms genetic evidence that tortoises west and east of the Colorado River are two separate species. The change in taxonomic classification will result in how Science (and the FWS) will refer to these two species of desert tortoise in the future. The Mojave population will now be known as Agassiz's desert tortoise, and the former Sonoran population will be known as Morafka's desert tortoise.
- The newly recognized species, Morafka's desert tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*), includes desert tortoises occurring east and south of the Colorado River from Arizona extending into Mexico. In December 2010, the Service determined that this population of tortoise warrants protection under the ESA but is precluded from listing by higher priorities.
- Agassiz's desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) occurs west and north of the Colorado River in California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. The Agassiz's desert tortoise is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).
- The recognition of Morafka's desert tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*) as a new species has no effect on the status of Agassiz's desert tortoise under the ESA. The status of Agassiz's desert tortoise has already been evaluated independently of Morafka's desert tortoise under their former recognition as the Mojave and Sonoran populations of the desert tortoise.
- The recovery plan (and forthcoming revised recovery plan) for the Mojave population of the desert tortoise applies directly to Agassiz's desert tortoise.
- The key difference between the two species is their habitat preferences: Morafka's desert tortoise prefers rock crevices on steep, rocky hillsides, and the threatened Agassiz's desert tortoise prefers to dig burrows in valleys. These and other differences are described in the recovery plan for the Mojave (Agassiz's) desert tortoise.
- On the Morafka side of the river there is a population of tortoises that has the Agassiz genotype in the Black Mountains of Arizona however; these tortoises are not included in the listed population.