

Summary of Meeting to Discuss Protecting Desert Tortoise from Predation by Common Ravens

California Desert District Office, Bureau of Land Management, Moreno Valley

May 3, 2003

Attendees

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	Ray Bransfield
Bureau of Land Management	Larry Foreman
Department of Defense	Clarence Everly
California Department of Fish and Game	Becky Jones
National Park Service	Debra Hughson
Southern California Edison	Dan Pearson
University of Redlands	Jill S. Heaton
Edwards Air Force Base	Shannon Collis
Marine Corps	Brent Husung
USDA Wildlife Services	Craig Coolahan, Shannon Hebert, Robert Beach, Joe Bennett
U.S. Geological Survey	Bill Boarman, Doug Chamblin
Department of the Interior	John Hamill

Background

Ray Bransfield provided a brief overview of the listing history and recovery planning for the desert tortoise, including a brief discussion of events that led to this meeting (i.e., decisions by Desert Managers and encouragement by interested parties in the desert to more actively pursue recovery actions for the desert tortoise).

Bill Boarman summarized his research findings on the common raven and provided copies of reports he has developed on his research. Bill provided a summary of actions that could be used to reduce subsidies to common ravens; they are:

- landfills - cover the waste; landfill managers need someone to tell them what they need to do and how to effectively do it
- garbage at other points in the waste stream - trash in dumpsters and trash cans can be made unavailable to common ravens; managers of these receptacles must be contacted and educated
- road kill - barrier fences can be effective
- water - difficult to manage in the western Mojave Desert; some facilities can be designed to make access to common ravens more difficult
- agricultural practices
- nest structures - power and telephone poles can be designed to reduce opportunities for nesting; this activity should only be done where other nesting opportunities are not present (i.e., if the common raven can move 50 feet to a Joshua tree or cliff, the pole is not enhancing habitat)

Bill also note that monitoring of numbers of common ravens and effectiveness of our actions was necessary; additional research on management of common ravens is also needed.

Bob Beach discussed the program to manage common ravens that is being undertaken in Nevada. The most salient points are:

- a portion of the program is funded by mitigation funds from the multi-species conservation plan in Clark County; the State of Nevada matches this funding; this money funds one person to conduct the work
- management work targets dairies, feedlots, pistachio orchards, and landfills; most work is on private land; depredation permits have been issued for common ravens because they attack lambs and calves as they are being born and adult livestock, they transport garbage from trash cans and landfills to areas where people congregate, and they consume agricultural products; the goal of programs is not to eliminate common ravens but to address the problems caused by too many common ravens
- Wildlife Services primarily works in areas where people or property are being affected by common ravens; Health Department usually wants the work done also (common ravens carrying trash from a landfill to a school is a health hazard.)
- Wildlife Services identifies the number of common ravens at the start of a treatment and an end target at each project site; treatments stop when that target is reached; the target may be reached because birds are killed, left the area, or died of other reasons; Wildlife Services does not set a pre-determined number of birds that needs to be removed per unit of time
- Wildlife Services has prepared a state-wide environmental assessment to address all its management activities for common ravens
- staff from the Clark County multi-species planning effort monitor the effectiveness of the treatments; the effectiveness monitoring is more difficult for desert tortoises than for other species
- Wildlife Services initially thought that 3,000 common ravens per year may be taken; in one year, approximately 7,000 common ravens were taken; in most years, between 3,000 and 4,000 are taken
- anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that common ravens know when to show up at particular locations for food (e.g., beginning of nesting season for sage grouse); a treatment at that site seems to substantially reduce the number of common ravens that show up at the site in subsequent years; removal of birds that are specifically keyed in to the site may be responsible for this reduction
- prior to each action, Wildlife Services notifies the Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office, Nevada Department of Wildlife, police, and health department
- treated common ravens could be tested for West Nile virus
- at least one city in the western Mojave Desert has asked Wildlife Services to take action regarding common ravens; overall, the interest in treatments has not been great in California's desert; that may be because of lack of knowledge of the Wildlife Services program
- shooting common ravens is not a useful control method
- Wildlife Services uses eggs treated with Alphacholoralose and DRC-1339; only Wildlife

- Services and its agents are allowed to use these chemicals; Wildlife Services needs to be approved to use the chemicals for specific purposes (i.e., at a feedlot, in open desert, etc.)
- the individual entity requesting a treatment obtains a depredation permit from the Fish and Wildlife Service; Wildlife Services submits a Form 37 to the Fish and Wildlife Service for each entity that explains how the treatment will be done, why it is being done, and who will do it (i.e., a qualified agent of the entity might actually do the treatment)

Scope of the Program

We discussed various options for protecting desert tortoises from predation by common ravens. These options included various components, such as:

- modifying habitats to decrease their value for common ravens
- targeting specific common ravens that are preying on desert tortoises throughout the California desert
- targeting aggregations of common ravens that are posing problems to health, safety, and property. These birds may contribute, indirectly or seasonally, to mortality of desert tortoises.
- trying to eliminate common ravens from specific areas (e.g., the Desert Tortoise Natural Area)

We discussed, in a general sense, how we could evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to protect desert tortoises from common ravens. We noted that:

- another subgroup formed by the Desert Managers Group was trying to address the overall issue of effectiveness monitoring. (However, that group is focused on fencing, grazing, and vehicles; .)
- the ecology of the desert tortoise made effectiveness monitoring difficult
- effectiveness monitoring did not need to occur everywhere; we might want to consider monitoring a couple of sites where different types of treatment occurred
- we should see how habitat conservation plan for Clark County evaluates effectiveness of control of common ravens

Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act

We need to define the need for the action. These needs could include:

- recovery of the desert tortoise
- human health and safety
- protection of property

Other issues and topics to address in the NEPA document could include:

- the cumulative impact of protecting desert tortoises from predation by common ravens
- we do not need to present a program to monitor effectiveness in the NEPA document; we do need to provide good evidence to support our conclusions
- what is the significance of the protection effort?; would the regional population of

common ravens be affected?

- how do we best involve the Fish and Wildlife Service in the NEPA process? (i.e., Fish and Wildlife Service needs to comply with NEPA also when it issues a permit under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act); see action item

What level of NEPA compliance is needed? We discussed writing a NEPA document that:

- limited the program to a fairly small geographic area until we could test methods and results
- allowed us to test the program on a small scale where opportunities might arise throughout the California desert
- allowed us to implement a protection program throughout the California desert
- Wildlife Services is prepared to take the lead on NEPA on a contract basis

Decisions:

- the recommendation to be presented to the Desert Managers Group will be to proceed with a program that:
 1. targets specific problem common ravens throughout the California desert;
 2. targets aggregations of common ravens anywhere in the California desert that are posing problems to health, safety, and property at the request of the harmed party;
 3. undertakes a public education program to try to get public to avoid actions that provide subsidies to common ravens (another DMG subgroup is working on public education; this aspect of the common raven program could be inserted into its efforts); and
 4. manages habitat to reduce opportunities for common ravens (landfill cover, design of power and telephone poles, etc.)
- brief the Desert Managers on June 11 or 12 regarding options on how to proceed with the management program and NEPA compliance
- we can inform managers that some aspects of the program do not need to wait for completion of a NEPA document (e.g., contacting local entities to determine if they have problems with common ravens and starting a public education program)

Staffing and funding a control program are issues. Implementation of a program would likely require a full-time coordinator, probably with Wildlife Services. Wildlife Services would likely be best agency to prepare the NEPA document, under contract to the Desert Managers Group.

Miscellaneous

If you want:

- copies of Bill Boarman's publications on common ravens, please contact him.
- a copy of "A summary of predation by corvids on threatened and endangered species in California and management recommendations to reduce corvid predation" by Liebezeit and George, Humboldt State University, please contact Ray Bransfield. This report is 150 pages long; please send me your email address so I can send you a PDF file.

Next meeting of this group - June 25 at Bureau of Land Management, Moreno Valley. The purpose of this meeting will be determined by results of the Desert Managers Group presentation.

We will provide this summary to other interested parties. See action item.

Additional agencies and groups that we should include in the next meeting or in some other manner:

Caltrans	City managers
County	Agriculture (Rural Conservation Districts?)
West Mojave Plan	Solid waste managers
Health departments	
Others?	

Action Items

1. Contact staff from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in Fish and Wildlife Service's Regional Office; determine how they want to participate in this effort regarding NEPA compliance and other aspects. Responsible party - Ray Bransfield

Staff from the Service's Regional Office have indicated that they wish to be involved in our planning.

2. Provide a copy of outline of a scoping document to Ray Bransfield. Responsible party - Larry Foreman

Done.

3. Write scoping document for review by group and presentation to Desert Managers at June 11-12 meeting. Responsible party - Ray Bransfield (with promise of assistance from John Hamill and Shannon Collis)

Not done. See "Upon Further Thought" section of this note

4. Provide a copy of environmental assessment for the Nevada program to group. Responsible party - Bob Beach or Shannon Hebert
5. Provide a copy of this summary (when finalized) to interested parties. Responsible party - Shannon Collis
6. Brief the Desert Managers Group on June 12, with assistance from Wildlife Services.
7. Develop new action items based on recommendations of the Desert Managers Group

meeting on June 11-12.

Upon Further Thought

After going over some of the comments I received on the draft minutes and discussing this issue with others, I began to wonder if the recommendation our group decided to present to the Desert Managers was the best choice. The bottom line for me is that we are being challenged to implement recovery actions for desert tortoises; one of those actions is dealing with the issue of predation by common ravens. The programs described by Wildlife Services seem to be effective in reducing the problems caused by gatherings of common ravens at various types of human facilities. Although some common ravens involved in these gatherings may, at some point, move to the desert and consume desert tortoises, we have no proof that they do.

Given my lack of comfort with the nexus, I propose to present the Desert Managers with a set of options, including one that I put together after talking to various people, based on my trepidation, and explain the origin of the options.

Options:

1. Target specific problem common ravens throughout the California desert; target aggregations of common ravens anywhere in the California desert that are posing problems to health, safety, and property at the request of the harmed party; undertake a public education program to try to get public to avoid actions that provide subsidies to common ravens and manage habitat to reduce opportunities for common ravens (landfill cover, design of power and telephone poles, etc.).

And

- a. Prepare a 'NEPA scoping document' and hold public meetings to try to gauge public thoughts on the level of NEPA compliance

OR

- b. Prepare an environmental assessment to comply with NEPA

OR

- c. Prepare an environmental impact statement to comply with NEPA.

- *. If we take this approach, we need to clearly define our problems and goals for each type of action (i.e., the connection between desert tortoises and treating common ravens in a city).

Or

2. Target specific problem common ravens throughout the California desert and prepare an environmental assessment to comply with NEPA.

And

Conduct a Nevada-type approach to specific issues caused by common ravens in

California (which would be done at the request of the entity with the problem), using a separate NEPA process

And

Use public education and best management practices during implementation of projects to restore habitat options for common ravens.

And

Conduct research to determine if individuals within the large aggregations of common ravens are moving from subsidized areas into the desert and killing desert tortoises or altering ecosystems.

And

Retrofit facilities to reduce their utility to common ravens; separate NEPA compliance may be necessary.

The major differences between these approaches is that all the actions in option 1 would be covered under one NEPA document; in option 2, the different actions would proceed along parallel but separate courses. The main advantage I see is that we can move ahead on different fronts without being slowed by missing information on one aspect of the overall program.