

Tortoises vs. tanks: no truce: Environmentalists oppose a deal aimed at letting the Army and an endangered reptile coexist.

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By Jennifer Bowles The Press-Enterprise

It was billed as a truce in the "tanks vs. tortoises" saga. A "win-win" situation, the politicians said. To environmentalists, it was anything but.

The politically charged 15-year battle over how to expand Fort Irwin in the Southern California desert has culminated in a deal environmentalists say will cause the desert tortoise to slide even closer to extinction.

The military says national security is at stake. Army leaders, mindful of vulnerability in the wake of the Chinese detention of a U.S. surveillance plane and its crew, say they need a remote desert valley to give their brigades of tanks room to engage in realistic war games.

The valley, however, is prime real estate in the tortoise's shrinking world, experts say. The reptile, a resident of the western Mojave as long as 5 million years, already has lost much of its habitat to housing, roads, recreation and military maneuvers. An endangered plant also stands in the Army's way.

Now, with the Army in the midst of a 2 1/2-year planning effort to capture 131,000 acres, environmentalists are plotting their strategy to prevent what they see as a disaster for the tortoise.

Once, the lumbering reptiles numbered as many as 300 per square mile in the western Mojave. Now only 10 to 50 can be found in the same space, said Kristin Berry, a U.S. Geological Survey biologist.

Federal wildlife officials are expected to issue a report this month assessing how the expansion could comply with the Endangered Species Act, and legislation is expected to be introduced in Congress to transfer the land to the Army.

Environmentalists worry that the Fort Irwin battle is already lost.

But it's not a done deal. Not yet.

The two sides in this simmering debate are personified by two men who are foreigners to the desert: a decorated war veteran from Oklahoma and an English scientist enraptured by the desert tortoise.

The general

From his memorabilia-adorned office on Fort Irwin, Brig. Gen. James D. Thurman has a bird's-eye view of war games rumbling through the desert on the sprawling base north of Barstow.

A TV monitor shows a computerized version of the maneuvers. "You can't hide out here," he says.

Known as the Super Bowl of the Army, the National Training Center is where troops train for war in circumstances as realistic as possible.

That, says Thurman, makes all the difference between life and death in real battles.

"They go very fast, it's very violent," he says.

He knows. He's been there. And he's seen soldiers die in action.

The 26-year Army veteran was part of a raid across the Iraqi border during the Persian Gulf War. Three soldiers were killed by enemy fire.

"I'll tell you up front: We can't afford to get training wrong," Thurman says, leaning forward from his chair. "Every one of these soldiers that are out here are sons and daughters of this nation. We've got to do the right thing in terms of training."

Faster tanks and longer-range artillery mean bigger training fields for 4,000 to 5,000 troops who visit each month for a 28-day visit, including two weeks in mock combat with the home team.

Realism is the goal, from the cooks who prepare the meals, to troops dealing with refugees and journalists, to the soldiers firing on the enemy.

The Army says it does try to avoid killing desert tortoises. Before the soldiers start training, they attend an environmental awareness class to, among other things, learn what to do should they come face-to-face with a tortoise (they should call the wildlife expert on base). On average, three to five tortoises are accidentally killed per year on the base, the Army says.

Fort Irwin, at 643,000 acres, already is the Army's largest tank training center, but Thurman points out that some terrain isn't usable. Natural features such as mountains prohibit tank maneuvers.

In its bid to expand the base, Army leaders have sought land in nearly every direction and settled on what they believe is a compromise: They gave up the coveted Paradise Valley, which federal wildlife officials say is a hotbed for desert tortoises, and lost some 60,000 acres in the process.

The compromise would expand Fort Irwin by 110,111 acres and allow the Army to convert a 22,139-acre strip along the south end of the base to a tank route. The Army had voluntarily set aside that corridor in 1993 to help protect tortoises.

The corridor is essential for tank maneuvers, Thurman says, and he is adamant: Tanks win wars. The Persian Gulf War proved that, he says.

"We've gotten enamored with some of our high-tech weapons," he says. "And I will tell you we can do a lot of things with air power. But when it comes to making a difference on the ground, it's still my belief you've got to have ground forces of some sort."

The tortoise defender

Michael Connor has loved turtles ever since he was a kid in England, even though the only wild turtles he knew about were the ones that washed ashore dead. He kept several pet turtles.

As an adult living in Southern California, he has come to the aid of the desert tortoise, reptiles that date to the age of dinosaurs.

"They're just really neat creatures," says Connor, executive director of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, a Riverside-based nonprofit organization.

The Army's expansion will cut into the remote Superior Valley, a move he says will ruin some of the tortoise's best habitat.

"This is all going to go, it's really sad," he says, standing on the edge of Superior Dry Lake, its edges soaked by a recent and rare rain.

"Once the tanks move in, it will be turned into a giant dust bowl," he says.

On this day, dark with rain clouds, the sloping valley is carpeted with creosote bush and festooned by Joshua trees. Some shacks and dirt roads mark the few human intrusions.

The ground is punctured with holes, some as small as a quarter, some as big as a basketball, evidence of an underground world brimming with wildlife. The tortoise lives 95 percent of its time in its burrow, hiding from the desert's scorching heat and its cold nights.

Other animals live here. Golden eagles. Prairie falcons. Burrowing owls. The Mojave ground squirrel, a state-protected species.

Then there is the Lane Mountain milk-vetch, a small, flowering plant listed as endangered in 1998. Two of its three known populations are in the Fort Irwin expansion area.

"It will be very difficult for them to overcome jeopardy," Connor says. What he means is that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which must make sure the expansion complies with the Endangered Species Act, would have a tough time seeing tanks coexisting with an endangered plant.

Connor fails to see why the Army should be given land that Fish and Wildlife already has deemed critical to the tortoise's survival. Only about 2 percent live long enough to reproduce, Connor says, so the need to save the ones that do is more urgent.

The base expansion is just one threat to tortoises. Ravens prey on hatchlings; off-roading and livestock grazing can ruin their food and crush their burrows; sprawl is destroying their land; dogs injure and kill them; and a respiratory disease is afflicting neighboring populations. The few that do survive can live 80 years or more.

An expansion northward into Leach Lake would be much more acceptable, Connor says, but the Army has dismissed that as too costly -- \$200 million to clean up unexploded ordnance. Plus, the Air Force uses Leach Lake as a bombing range.

Even if the Army sets aside a preserve elsewhere, he says, it will be hard to replicate this prime habitat in a desert with dwindling open space.

"I can't imagine a situation where we just allow species to disappear," he says. "I can't see how morally we can allow that. I don't see how we can ethically do that."

The politics

Far from the desert, the Fort Irwin plan has been the center of a political struggle in Washington between the Interior Department trying to abide by the Endangered Species Act and the Defense Department trying to ensure national security.

The deal to expand Fort Irwin came to a head last fall. Two years of negotiations culminated in a meeting involving then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Defense Secretary William Cohen.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, announced in October that a deal had been struck.

"It's a win-win for the environment and our military training needs," Feinstein said in a news release then.

Environmentalists were dumbfounded that Feinstein, typically their supporter, agreed to a plan they said dealt a serious blow to the desert tortoise.

"What did Sen. Feinstein have to gain from this?" asked Daniel Patterson, of the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's unclear what kind of political trading is going on here. We're just not really sure."

Feinstein agreed but looked into other options supported by environmentalists, such as having base housing moved to Barstow or sharing lands with China Lake Naval Weapons Center. But, Gantman said, neither the Navy nor the Army was interested.

Feinstein and the Interior Department stood their ground against the Army brass to protect Paradise Valley from tanks.

"The Army from day one has said, 'We have to have that corridor,' " said David Hayes, former deputy Interior secretary. "And we just said no. The data are too strong; it's a real stronghold for the tortoise, and we said no."

The Army's current plan will use neighboring Superior Valley, also a tortoise haven.

Hayes said he doesn't understand environmentalists' opposition.

"What this does is provide a green light to actively explore this alternative," Hayes said. "But it fully empowers the Fish and Wildlife to make the final call."

Last year, a blue-ribbon panel of federal, state and university scientists said if the Army were to expand, it would have to create a 2,000-square-mile tortoise preserve. At the time, the expansion included the coveted Paradise Valley.

Three of the panel's 12 members said the sprawling preserve wasn't enough, and refused to sign off on the panel's report.

Raymond Bransfield, a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, was one of them.

"In my view, the panel was very swayed by politics and went to the issue of what can we do to fix it," Bransfield said. "We never answered the first question" of whether the tortoise could survive the expansion.

Because the current expansion plan will move into land already declared critical for the survival of the tortoise, the Army will have to take steps to help the reptile. A preserve could be one idea.

"If this all gets approved, that will be stuff that needs to be figured out," said Bransfield, the wildlife service's lead biologist in the expansion.

In December, Congress appropriated \$75 million to take steps to protect the tortoise as Fort Irwin expands.

Of the current proposal, Bransfield says: "This is by far the least damaging to the tortoise . . . but that's very relative."

The future

At Fort Irwin, the ball is rolling on the expansion plan. If all goes as planned, the Army should be able to roll the tanks into new territory by August 2002.

Environmentalists huddled last weekend in the desert to get ready for battle.

"We think the impacts from this will make the tortoise extinct in the western Mojave. You can't say it clearer than that," said Elden Hughes, chair of the Sierra Club's desert committee.

"And the extinction of the tortoise," he said, "is not a win-win."

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Tanks vs. Tortoises

The Army says it needs to expand Fort Irwin, the nations largest Army tank training center, by 131,000 acres to simulate real-life combat with faster tanks and longer-distance weaponry. Environmentalists fear the expansion into tortoise territory will push the threatened reptile closer to extinction.

Eastern expansion

Supplies and cooks could be placed in a staging area here, freeing other Fort Irwin land for tank maneuvers.

Corridor

Additional land would double the width of the maneuver corridor, allowing brigades to take better advantage of the western expansion area. Much of the land was previously set aside by the Army as a desert tortoise haven.

Western expansion

Would give the Army a large expanse of relatively flat terrain to conduct maneuvers.

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Lane Mountain Mild-Vetch

The wispy perennial with silvery leaves and purple flowers is a member of the pea family. It was listed as endangered in October 1998, after surveys revealed no more than 160 plants, all in the desert near Fort Irwin. Threats include havitat destruction from mining, off-road vehicles and tanks.

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Desert Tortoise

California's state reptile is threatened with extinction and received federal protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1990. Populations have been declining since the 1970s, and habitat loss continues. The chief threats to the reptile include predatory birds, grazing, off-road vehicles, shooters, theft and tanks.

Art: PHOTOS; MAPS

Caption: Cecil, a desert tortoise that is nearly 30 years old, has become a mascot among soldiers at Fort Irwin. Cecil has been living at the training center for about three years. Carrie Rosema

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Michael Connor says the Superior Valley is a key habitat for the desert tortoise. The reptiles take refuge in burrows like the one shown here. Brig. Gen. James D. Thurman says the lives of U.S. soldiers may depend on the realistic drills they conduct at Fort Irwin. Carrie Rosema

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Soldiers participate in training exercises at Fort Irwin National Training Center, which is known as the Super Bowl of the Army.

Notes: Includes Info Boxes; See Sidebar "Other military Bases confront restrictions."

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