

December 16, 1997

MOL. 19980319.0468

Natural History Notes: Testudines

GOPHERUS AGASSIZII (Desert Tortoise). Predation. A variety of predators, most notably coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) have been reported to prey on hatchling desert tortoises (Ernst et al. 1994. *Turtles of the United States and Canada*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 578 pp.). Here, we report an observation of a hatchling tortoise, fitted with a radiotransmitter, that was preyed upon by native fire ants (*Solenopsis* sp.) in the eastern Mojave Desert at Yucca Mountain, Nevada (36°50'N, 116°25'E). On 8/27/94, tortoise #9315 (carapace length = 45 mm, age = 5 d) was found alive with eyes, chin, and parts of the head and legs being eaten by ants. The tortoise was alive, but lethargic, and responded little when touched. Eight of 74 other radiomarked hatchlings monitored at Yucca Mountain during 1992-1994 were found dead with fire ants on their carcass 3-7 days after the hatchlings emerged from their nests. It is not known whether those tortoises were killed by ants or were being scavenged when found. While imported fire ants (*S. invicta*) have long been known to kill hatchling gopher tortoises (*G. polyphemus*; Mount 1981. *J. Alabama Acad. Sci.* 52:71-78), native fire ants have previously not been implicated as predators of desert tortoises. However, only 1 of 75 (or at worst 9 of 75) was killed by fire ants, suggesting that although fire ants do kill hatchlings, they were not important predators on desert tortoises during this study. Tortoise specimens were deposited at the University of California at Berkeley.

Submitted by **James L. Boone, Danny L. Rakestraw, and Kurt R. Rautenstrauch**,
Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), 1180 Town Center Dr., Las
Vegas, Nevada 89134, U.S.A.

Tortoises were handled under permits PRT-683011 and PRT-781234 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and S-0446, S-1595, S-3108, S-5041, S-6941, and S-9060 from the Nevada Division of Wildlife. This research was supported and managed by the U.S. Department of Energy, Yucca Mountain Site Characterization Office, as part of the Civilian Radioactive Waste Management Program under contracts DE-AC08-93-NV-11265 and DE-AC01-91-RW-00134. The U.S. Government retains a nonexclusive, royalty-free license to publish or reproduce the published form of this contribution, or to allow others to do so, for U.S. Government purposes. This paper was prepared as an account of work sponsored by an agency of the United States Government. Neither the United States nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise, does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government or any agency thereof.