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Review: The Sonoran Desert Tortoise: Natural History, Biology and Conservation

By Thomas R. VanDevender, ed.

Reviewed by [Rosemary Streatfeild](#)
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Thomas R. Van Devender (Ed.). *The Sonoran Desert Tortoise: Natural History, Biology and Conservation*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002. 389 pp. ISBN 0-8165-2191-3 (hardcover). US\$70.00. Alkaline paper.

There is much interest today, both lay and professional, in desert tortoises. They are kept as pets by many people and studied by a select group of wildlife scientists. Indeed, a quick search on Google will find many websites outlining research projects, advice, and details on past and upcoming meetings. Although the Mohave Desert Tortoise has been well studied and documented, little has been published to date on the Sonoran Desert Tortoise. In this book, *The Sonoran Desert Tortoise: Natural History, Biology and Conservation*, Thomas R. Van Devender (Senior Research Scientist at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum) has assembled a collection of articles written by a number of people who specialize in the Sonoran Desert Tortoise, thus providing a powerful tool for people interested in this charismatic creature. The book is dedicated to Charles Lowe, a mentor to many of the contributors to the book and a significant presence for much that is known about the natural world of the greater Southwest.

Contributions come from a group of people with hands-on expertise with the Sonoran Desert Tortoise. Eleven of the 15 chapters were presented as papers at a symposium held at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson in January 1997. The book begins with chapters on information gathered from the fossil record on gopher tortoises, progresses through details about the genetic, distributional, and ecological variances between different populations, and proceeds into specifics, including behavior, diet, environmental needs, conservation, and protection. The concluding chapter focuses on traditional knowledge obtained from the indigenous peoples of the Sonoran Desert.

Throughout the book there is both general and technical information that the reader can glean for his own purposes. In the first chapter, Van Devender provides an excellent summary on the natural history of the Sonoran Desert Tortoise in Arizona drawn from his own research experiences and from the chapters that follow. Within the five chapters that focus on the tortoise's diet and nutrition, the reader can find details on methods for collecting information on diet, variations in diet between different habitat sites,

nutritional content of the plants consumed, physiological adaptations to the available vegetation, health of tortoises in the wild, the diet of captive tortoises, and growth expectations.

One chapter contains a comprehensive review of the strategies for the protection and conservation of the Sonoran Desert Tortoise in Arizona, which are becoming more and more necessary as habitat is lost to development and fragmentation. These animals have been protected by the Arizona Game and Fish Department since 1988, and are considered a threatened species in Mexico. Also in 1988, the Bureau of Land Management adopted a management strategy for habitat range within public lands in the four states known to contain desert tortoises, which includes a compensation policy to landowners. In addition, a management plan for tortoise conservation drawn up by the Arizona Interagency Desert Tortoise Team has been in place since 1996.

This book is the first comprehensive publication focusing specifically on the Sonoran Desert Tortoise, and is a necessary addition to research libraries and a useful resource for backyard enthusiasts.

Recommended sites:

The Desert Tortoise Council <http://www.deserttortoise.org/>
Arizona Game & Fish Department: Desert Tortoise Management
http://www.gf.state.az.us/wildlife_conservation/desert_tortoise.html

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