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First Bolson Tortoises Born in New Mexico in Over 7,500 Years

Turner Endangered Species Reports Important Success for Long-term Restoration Effort

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BOZEMAN, Mont., -- Today the Turner Endangered Species Fund (TESF) reports that for the first time in approximately 10,000 years, three new bolson tortoises hatched out of their eggshells and scurried for cover in their new Chihuahuan desert home. Earlier in the summer their mother had carefully buried the eggs on Ted Turner's Armendaris Ranch in south-central New Mexico.

The hatchlings were found by Rosalinda Palomo Ramos, a New Mexico State University graduate student, who is studying the diet of the tortoises. The three wild hatchlings have now joined seven of their 2009 siblings, which had hatched from eggs that were collected on the ranch and were then placed in incubators. Next year, the hatchlings will join their one-to-three year old siblings, which now live in a predator-proof "headstart" pen on the Ladder Ranch, another Turner ranch located west of the Armendaris. The vision is for the hatchlings is that they be re-released in the wild once they reach a size where they are less vulnerable to predation by ravens, coyotes, and other predators.

Bolson tortoises were long considered extinct until a remnant population was discovered in 1959 in northern Mexico in an area known as Bolson de Mapami. (bolsons are enclosed desert basins, or valleys). In the 1970's a group of tortoises was brought to the Appleton Research Ranch in southeastern Arizona, and in 2006, all 26 of these tortoises were moved to the Armendaris Ranch.

TESF oversees the bolson tortoise recovery program. This project is particularly exciting, given that very little is known about the ecology, life history, or husbandry of bolson tortoises. This lack of knowledge is not surprising since the species has been extinct from the U.S. for thousands of years. The Fund has assembled a group of renowned tortoise experts to guide the conservation effort. The Fund also works closely with the Living Desert Zoo in Carlsbad, NM, which houses four of the original Appleton tortoises and is also raising hatchlings from incubated eggs.

The bolson tortoise (*Gopherus flavomarginatus*) is one of four species of land tortoises native to North America. It is also the largest, weighing up to 13 kilograms (29 pounds) or more. Its lifespan is similar to a human's, living 70 years or more and reaching sexual

maturity as a teenager. Paleontologists believe the species ranged from Arizona eastward to west Texas during the late Pleistocene, about 10,000 years ago.

From a conservation standpoint, having all your tortoise “eggs in one basket” is risky. Hence, establishing a new population, in addition to the original Mexican population, is a significant contribution to science, society, and nature. TESH programs, such as the bolson tortoise restoration effort on Turner’s ranches, play an important role in this regard.

The Turner Endangered Species Fund is a non-profit operational charity dedicated to preserving nature by ensuring the persistence of imperiled species and their habitats with an emphasis on private land. The Fund was formed by Ted Turner and his family in June 1997.

The Armendaris and Ladder ranches collectively they comprise over 500,000 acres of the most stunning Chihuahua grassland, desert scrub, riverine mixed forest, and sky island habitat still remaining in the southwestern United States. The ranches are located in southern New Mexico and are currently the only restoration sites in the United States for the Bolson tortoise.



Figure 1. Two bolson tortoise hatchlings from the Armendaris ranch in 2009.



Figure 2. Bolson tortoise hatchling “G4” who struggled for several days to escape the confines of the egg. A shell fragment is still stuck to “her” head (gender currently unknown). While she was initially lethargic, probably exhausted from hatching, she has begun to drink water and grow more vigorous by the day.



Figure 3. Adult bolson tortoises can lives for 70 or more years and grow quite large weighing 30 pounds or more.