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Desert Tortoise Recovery Implementation Teams

Webinar #2

Questions Asked with Responses

Webinar Participation: Seven webinars were conducted; 47 RIT members participated (78%) of the 60 total RIT members.

Questions and Answers Discussed during Webinars: The questions raised over the seven webinars have been collected and are presented below for the benefit of all RIT members. In some cases, the responses below may be more elaborate than what was discussed on the call, reflecting additional consideration given by staff since the original webinar. The questions and their answers are not presented in any particular order, but are listed under a set of organizing topical areas for the benefit of reviewers.

Coordinating RITs & RIT Workgroups

Q1: Can we meet together prior to the in-person meeting and propose recovery actions as a group?

A1: Yes. We encourage you to do this, if possible.

Q2: Will we see only our own proposed recovery actions in the tool?

A2: Yes. You'll be sharing with others in your workgroup and on your RIT at the in-person meeting.

Q3: How do we coordinate with the other adjacent workgroup areas?

A3: The in-person meeting will include all workgroups within your Recovery Implementation Team area. "Cross-pollination" across workgroups is encouraged; we will make available each workgroup's information prior to the in-person meeting and will provide time specific for interaction between all workgroups at the meeting.

Q4: When can we see our workgroup's proposals?

A4: We would like to get the entire list of proposals submitted into the recovery action proposal tool by your workgroup members out to the entire workgroup a couple of weeks prior to your in-person meeting so that you have a chance to think about them.

Implementation & Monitoring

Q5: How do we go from recommendation to implementation of proposed recovery actions?

A5: Your action plan will provide recommendations for the different land management agencies that will be used in their respective planning and budgeting processes. Each

workgroup's 5 Year-Action Plan will provide a menu of possible mitigation options which can be incorporated into mitigation strategies as the need arises.

Q6: Are implementation reports going to be required on any of the actions taken?

A6: The 5-Year Action Plan that you will develop at the in-person meeting will include a *Tracking & Monitoring Plan*. Implementation reporting will be an important part of the *Tracking & Monitoring Plan*.

Q7: What are the costs of implementing these actions? Have the successes of any of these actions been measured?

A7: Costs for implementing each recovery action will be highly variable. Unfortunately, we lack specific information on the effectiveness of most recovery actions (available information for each action is described in the Model Explorer). Therefore, we are placing emphasis on the tracking and monitoring component to be included in each 5-year Action Plan to better document both successes and failures of recovery action implementation, thereby applying the principle of adaptive management to the recovery program.

Q8: If we know of certain actions that have been proposed already, but are in the works and haven't been implemented yet, would that information be helpful?

A8: Yes! If possible, provide this information to DTRO staff as early as possible.

Q9: Are we going to monitor for effectiveness (adaptive management)?

A9: The 5-Year Action Plan that you will develop at your in-person meeting will be composed of 3 Parts: the Background information section, the Prioritized Action Plan, and the Tracking & Monitoring Plan. Planning for effectiveness monitoring will be an important part of your Tracking & Monitoring Plan. The outputs of the Spatial Decision Support System will compose the Background of your Action Plan. Then, as part of the RIT process, using the outputs of the SDSS as your guide, you will create the prioritized action plan and tracking and monitoring plan together as a workgroup.

Q10: Are monitoring data available to us all?

A10: Yes, you can find the range-wide monitoring reports at:
http://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/dt_reports.html

SDSS Model: Threat and Recovery Action Ranking Data

Q11: What does it mean for a recovery action type to be highly ranked?

A11: There are 27 recovery action types whose potential effectiveness is ranked based on how individual recovery actions affect threat-stress links in the model. This allows us to rank which recovery action types are most likely to be most effective given the variation in which threats occur across the range of the desert tortoise.

The Recovery Action Proposal Tool provides a breakdown of the threats which are expected to be affected by each particular action in each area (pie charts), and the Data Explorer will assist you in seeing where the threats are located and what they are.

Q12: Are some threat risks double-counted?

A12: No, but many recovery action types can ameliorate more than one threat-stress relationship in the model.

Q13: How did you aggregate the risk map?

A13: Risk is calculated as the contribution from all threats in each grid cell on the map to population change, as per the model and weights in the Model Explorer.

Q 14: Can you please explain what the “whiskers” in the “Whisker Plot” mean?

A14: In the recovery action ranking charts, the center symbols of each bar indicate the average estimated effectiveness, and endpoints at the end of each “whisker” indicate potential high and low estimated effectiveness for each action type.

Q15: The grazing and mining recovery actions have both immediate and long-term effects, versus environmental education which is less certain. Can you provide some distinction between these temporal differences – weights/values?

A15: We try to capture this in our whisker plots in which recovery action types are ranked for each area. Center symbols of each bar indicate the average estimated effectiveness, and endpoints indicate potential high and low estimated effectiveness for each action type. The difference between the high and low estimates is related to the certainty with which we expect an action to reduce risks to the tortoise.

Q16: On threat rankings, why is controlling dogs separate from predator control?

A16: The threat of "Free-roaming Dogs" is separate from the threat of "Coyotes & Feral Dogs" and from the threat of "Ravens." These threats are defined separately because the effects of each threat on tortoise populations are different, and the recovery action types which are appropriate for each threat are different. All definitions for threats, stresses, population effects and the different recovery action types can be viewed in the Model Explorer.

Q17: Why don't I see solar or wind farms as big risks to the desert tortoise on the threat rankings?

A17: The aggregated population risk is for threats that are already present on the ground; our risk surface does not include proposed threats. While including potential or hypothetical or proposed threats is beyond the scope of the SDSS, the SDSS can be useful in considering such threats relative to the status and location of conservation areas or linkages.

Q18: Can we modify the charts/graphs (results of the spatial decision support system) that suggest which are high priority actions or do we just need to justify actions of a lower priority?

A18: Outputs are based on the model and spatial data that were revised based on the Recovery Implementation Teams' reviews in the Data Explorer and Model Explorer tools during April and May 2012. You will be provided the opportunity to review the model and datasets annually. In the meantime, please use the current outputs to inform your proposals

for what recovery actions are most important to implement and where. We expect that effort focused on highly ranked action types, also considering the range of effectiveness indicated in the chart, will provide the greatest benefit to the desert tortoise. However, if you have information or site-specific knowledge that a particular action that is not currently ranked highly but would be important or valuable to implement (such as being important preconditions for future implementation of higher priority recovery actions), you may propose such actions in the Recovery Action Proposal tool. The workgroup can then discuss these actions within the context of the full suite of proposed actions at the in-person meeting.

Q19: I am concerned and disagree with the ranking of grazing as the number one threat in much of this workgroup area. On the allotments that were closed, what benefit was there for desert tortoises? I believe that the model is flawed. Is there any way the workgroups can debate the rankings?

A19: The Model Explorer provides the rationale and published references for all the threat relationships. We can also provide personalized assistance to navigate the model and explain why particular threats ranks highly in different workgroup areas. We welcome and encourage RIT members to provide critical information that we have not captured in our current model or spatial datasets. Keep in mind that the SDSS summarizes the available scientific information and is meant to serve as a tool to use to propose recovery actions based on the underlying data; it does not mean that implementing any particular recovery action, such as removing grazing, has to be the only proposed recovery action. The rankings may change in future iterations of the model if additional data are provided to support such a change. There will an annual opportunity to submit additional data to the model.

Q20: Some threats in our workgroup area seem to be ranked differently from what we might expect. Why is that?

A20: The output incorporates spatial data that we have about where recovery actions have already been implemented. The reduction in threats from these recovery actions is incorporated into the threats rankings. In addition, rankings are relative, and if there are not a lot of threats in an area, then those that do occur in that area show up as highly ranked.

Q21: Is there a layer that shows areas that would benefit from restoration?

A21: Yes. If you begin by looking at the threat breakdown pie chart for the particular action type of interest in your area, you can determine which threats are in your area that we expect will be reduced by an action, such as habitat restoration. Then, you can use the Data Explorer to look at where those particular threats occur in your area of interest. This will guide you toward area that would benefit from each recovery action.

Proposing Recovery Actions

Q22: Most recovery actions will be for one particular conservation area, not the area as a whole. Why would we propose actions outside of the conservation area?

A22: Other areas outside conservation areas are also important to desert tortoise recovery, such as important linkages or important habitat which has not been formally designated as a

conservation area. In addition, you may want to propose an action which is not site-specific, such as public information broadcasts.

Q23: If you don't have links between habitat and populations, how do we know what's important for us to protect?

A23: We lack detailed information on how specific habitat variables directly influence desert tortoise vital rates (e.g., how do different levels of perennial vegetation cover affect tortoise survival or reproduction?). However, the SDSS models incorporate published information about the linkages between both habitat- and tortoise-based threats and tortoise populations, plus the best available assessment of the relative weights of those linkages.

Q24: Are the least-cost corridors best to protect? How do we focus for conservation?

A24: Linkages between tortoise conservation areas are important for recovery of the desert tortoise. RIT members will have to balance conservation action priorities based on workgroup-specific assessments of the relative degree of overall risk inside conservation areas and linkages based on the SDSS outputs, as well as information about the urgency of particular threats or opportunities for particular actions.

Q25: How do I make sure that I propose a recovery action that will put me on the high side of the "whiskers" (in a "Whisker Plot")?

A25: Think about the *specific* target of the recovery action and how you expect that action to ameliorate a particular threat or threats. This is where your on-the-ground knowledge is very valuable and where it is really important for you to be specific in describing your proposed recovery actions. Vague or non-specific recovery actions without clearly described expectations are less likely to be successful.

Q26: What if we would like to propose a recovery action that isn't listed here (i.e., is an "other")?

A26: Send Cat Darst an email to see if the action that you would like to propose does or doesn't fit within existing recovery action categories; if not, we can add it or add an "other" category.

Q27: Should the timeframe for the actions we propose be over the long- or short-term?

A27: It depends on the action you propose. We assume in the range of 5 to 25 years.

Q28: Should we focus on actions that will only be implemented over the next 5 years, or over the longer term?

A28: There is no reason why you can't include longer-term or less certain proposals in your plan. However, please think about site-specific ideas, not broad ones. If your workgroup planning team believes that a particular idea is worth putting in your plan, then carrying it forward in your 5-year plan might provide traction for an action that hasn't been the focus of recovery so far.