

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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THE BOLSON TORTOISE, NORTH AMERICA'S LARGEST LAND REPTILE, PROPOSED FOR ENDANGERED LIST

The Bolson tortoise, the largest land reptile in North America, has been proposed for listing as an endangered species by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The proposal was published in the September 27, 1978, Federal Register.

The Bolson tortoise lives primarily in grassland areas of the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Durango in Mexico. Adults may grow quite large, with shells measuring more than 39 inches in length. In spite of its size, the Bolson tortoise is one of the least known reptiles in the Northern Hemisphere.

One of the main causes for the species' decline is hunting by local people who use the tortoises for food. Although much of the area inhabited by the tortoises is sparsely settled, tortoise populations are often wiped out as far away as 6 miles from the nearest human settlement.

Habitat destruction is also a serious threat to the species. Much of the tortoise's habitat is being converted to agriculture, and plowing and irrigation of fields have already apparently contributed to the extirpation of some tortoise populations. Increasingly, overgrazing by cattle and goats is destroying browse needed by the tortoises; and grazing animals also trample tortoise burrows and cover sites.

In the past, the Bolson tortoise was in demand by zoos, museums, and private collectors. It is not known how many tortoises are still being taken from the wild as the species is now listed on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. This means that Bolson tortoises cannot be imported into countries that have signed the Convention, such as the United States, without a document from the Mexican government certifying that the purpose of the import will not be detrimental to the species. Some trade is probably continuing, however. Listing the tortoise as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 would provide the species additional protection by strictly limiting the purposes for which it would be imported into the United States. It would also open the way for the United States and Mexico to develop cooperative conservation programs for the tortoise.

Persons wishing to comment on this proposal should submit their comments by no later than December 26, 1978, to the Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

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