

Saving Florida's gopher tortoises: Group rescues reptiles from death by development

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Though gopher tortoises have persisted for millions of years, they now face a barrage of threats from loss of habitat and developers with permits that allow the reptiles to be buried alive.

From 1991-2007, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

issued incidental take permits (ITPs) allowing land owners to pay a fee that would allow them to legally "take" tortoises. Though developers could relocate tortoises on-site, many were buried alive in their burrows underneath homes or roadways, forced to endure a slow, painful death.

Though new permits aren't being issued by FWC, existing ITPs are grandfathered in and can be transferred when land changes hands.

Carissa Kent, a Tampa native who spent years living in Central Florida, first heard about ITPs when reading a Humane Society article detailing a Deltona Walmart project that was burying the creatures. Although Kent had a career with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office and aspirations of working for the FBI, this was a turning point that would change her life.

"When a house, a sidewalk or infrastructure gets put on top of them, they're stuck. There's someone's living room above their burrow, and they just go back down and slowly suffer and die," she said. "I couldn't sleep for about four days, and I decided to change my career."

Having no experience in biology or conservation, Kent, then 28 years old, spent countless hours researching and reaching out to potential allies, often being "stonewalled" by people who wouldn't give her the time of day. Then, she found Dr. Jennifer Hobgood, a former director of the Humane Society in Florida, and Dr. Matt Aresco, director of the Nokuse Plantation in the Florida Panhandle.

"Carissa and I met in 2006. She contacted us, it was the very first project she was working on," Aresco said. "We agreed to accept the tortoises from that project. ... We have about 27,000 acres of good gopher tortoise habitat."

The next spring, with some hard work from Kent and her team, around

700 tortoises found a new home on the preserve.

An 'incredible loss'

The idea behind FWC's incidental take permit program for gopher tortoises was that money earned from ITPs would be used to make up for habitat loss through new conservation lands.

Permits were issued based on the acreage of tortoise habitat affected. For example, in 2004, Lake Nona Land Co. paid \$104,114 for an ITP on a 206-acre site that contained 62 acres of gopher tortoise habitat, allowing them to "take" an estimated 205 reptiles.

Other permits have been issued to Central Florida projects managed by Disney, Orange County Public Schools, the Florida Department of Transportation, Valencia Community College, Target, Walmart and Avalon Park.

But Aresco said that only a fraction of tortoise habitat was purchased to offset massive losses.

"The sad thing is that [ITP] money got taken by the Legislature and put into general revenue instead of being used for what the intended purpose was," he said.

Using data from public records requests, Aresco determined that nearly \$80 million was raised from the 15-year incidental take permit program.

"From 1991 to 2007, the estimate was 170,000 acres of gopher tortoise habitat loss under those permits," he said. "They only purchased about 16,000 acres of land and only about 6,500 acres of actual gopher tortoise habitat. That's only about a 4 percent offset of what was lost in habitat during that time."

In his research of the more than 3,000 ITPs that were issued, Aresco estimated that more than 100,000 gopher tortoise lives could have been lost.

Getting to work

When Kent and Aresco joined forces to begin relocating gopher tortoises from ITP sites, there was a sense of urgency to their work, but funding and support were initially hard to come by.

After six years of serving with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office in child abuse investigations, Kent was vested and left her position to cash out her retirement—in the name of rescuing these reptiles. In 2006, she founded Saving Florida's Gopher Tortoises and partners like Hobgood helped find grants for funding.

"I ended up becoming a process server working 40-60 hours a week and doing the gopher tortoise stuff on the side," she said. "It was daunting at 28 years old to have a busy job and then also get this launched."

While Kent and her team diligently worked to relocate tortoises to Nokuse Plantation, Aresco found environmental allies.

"They thought they were doing a good thing by collecting this money to buy habitat with it," he said. "As it turns out, the program did not work very well and not very much habitat was actually purchased for the incredible loss in the number of tortoises—even the offset for [loss of habitat](#)."

In early 2005, longtime Orlando Sentinel environment reporter Kevin Spear wrote an article with the headline: "Developers' legal gopher-tortoise killings rile foes," a story that Aresco credits as a turning point for the public outcry against ITPs. In the years to follow, picketing,

behind-the-scenes work and a March 2007 visit to Gov. Charlie Crist helped win the day for environmental activists.

Still, those same environmentalists had to reckon with the fact that existing permits would still be valid.

"People get confused because they think when the species was uplisted in 2007 and the permits stopped being issued that developers couldn't use them anymore. But the permits were grandfathered in so they can," Kent said.

She and Hobgood first worked with FWC to create an amendment to ITPs that would allow for off-site relocation. Though the officials once in charge of the ITP program are no longer with the agency, FWC still deals with the legacy of these permits.

"FWC recognizes that ITPs do not expire and the permit allows the taking of gopher tortoises from development-related activities on the site," said Carli Segelson, public information director with the FWC Division of Habitat and Species Conservation, in an email. "FWC has also implemented projects to conduct targeted outreach regarding humane relocation efforts to permittees with incidental take permits."

Silver linings

Kent and her team have been able to relocate or rehabilitate close to 15,000 tortoises through years of effort.

"With reptiles, you have to do extra hard work to get people on board with conservation. They're not cute and cuddly, and they're not adorable," she said. "It hasn't been an easy road, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

On a weekly basis, Kent enlists the help of partners such as Longwood-based Ecological Consulting Solutions Inc., who will use backhoes or excavators to dig burrows on ITP sites that are up to 30 feet deep.

Since 2017, the Saving Florida's Gopher Tortoises project has received funding from the Department of Defense to relocate tortoises onto Eglin Air Force Base in the Panhandle. Jeremy Preston, an endangered species biologist with the base, said these tortoises are helping the Air Force meet its conservation goals.

"We're not just thinking about an individual tortoise, but what's really valuable is a population of animals that are successfully breeding, laying eggs and having hatchlings survive," he said. "The Air Force is benefiting from having viable populations of this particular species restored back onto our landscape."

However, future funding is unclear and Kent is raising money on GoFundMe to help ensure the longevity of this project. For years, she has partnered with Swamp Girl Adventures in Central Florida, as they can accept donations for her mission and help with tortoise rehabilitation.

In addition, some developers are now more willing to pay for relocation services, even if they are legally permitted to "take" tortoises.

"It's about \$200-\$300 a tortoise for us. That's not how much it costs for regular relocation, but we don't make any profit on top of what it takes to break even and pay hour for hour," Kent said. "We're getting 800-1,000 tortoises a year on average ... That's well over \$200,000 to do that."

The conservationists know they need to keep fighting to save gopher tortoises still out there on these permitted parcels.

The gopher [tortoise](#)'s shell "protects it from just about everything there is in nature. Yet, it's so vulnerable to development and roads and human disturbance," Aresco said. "We do what we can to save the species from decline, and that's what we're going to keep doing."

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