


Protecting Military Readiness and the Iconic Gopher Tortoise at the Same Time

Credit Strategy Looks to Add More Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

By Dan Chapman, Public Affairs Specialist

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Tifton, Ga. – There isn't a military base for 50 miles, but the Army plays a critical role at the Alapaha River Wildlife Management Area.

A first-in-the-nation [conservation plan](#) , crafted by the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and wildlife agencies in Alabama, Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, protects at-risk gopher tortoises here while helping military bases to continue training and testing missions across the tortoise's Southern turf.

The Gopher Tortoise Conservation and Crediting Strategy – think of a savings account where the military can make deposits now (tortoise credits) that will be available for future use – was officially unveiled at a ceremony in this Southwest Georgia community near the state's newest Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

The goal is to keep the tortoise from being listed under the [Endangered Species Act](#), a designation that could complicate the military's training or bombing exercises. This strategy encourages conservation investments first that will help keep the tortoise off that list. If it makes the list in the future, the credit strategy will allow the military to continue its mission without new conservation requirements because of those early deposits it already invested in voluntary conservation efforts.

In fact, any of the 22 Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force or National Guard bases within the tortoise's Southern range are eligible to participate in the credit program at Alapaha.

"It's a unique approach to help the military balance mission activities with conservation responsibilities," said Maureen Sullivan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Environment, Safety and Occupational Health. "We hope this innovative approach can serve as a model for similar initiatives for other [species](#) and in other regions of the country."

Utilities, transportation departments and others might also fashion similar pre-listing credit strategies. They're needed. Since 2011, environmental groups have requested the Service evaluate about 500 [species](#) to determine if they are threatened or endangered. The Service has since determined that 97 of the [proposed species](#) don't need federal protection.

“This crediting strategy ensures the military has the regulatory predictability it needs to carry out critical missions and training while at the same time providing conservation benefits for the gopher tortoise,” said Cindy Dohner, Southeast Regional Director for the Fish and Wildlife Service. “This kind of solution-oriented partnership offers flexibility for the military, private landowners, public agencies and others that keeps working lands working, contributes to our nation’s military readiness, and provides hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities.”

Tortoise as keystone



Andy Day, a biologist with the Georgia DNR shines light into a tortoise burrow with a mirror. Photo by Roy Hewitt, USFWS.

Andy Day and Seth Thompson traipsed across prime tortoise territory one recent, unseasonably warm morning in search of the elusive reptile. Day, a contract biologist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and Thompson, the newly anointed manager of the Alapaha River WMA, stooped to peer into the many burrows dotting the land covered in longleaf pines.

Day cleared leaves with a snake stick, positioned a mirror to shoot the sun’s rays into burrows and contorted his body to peer deep into the sandy holes.

Nothing.

“Well,” Day said, “we struck out.”



Seth Thompson, manager of Alapaha WMA. Photo by Roy Hewitt, USFWS.

A rare whiff. Alapaha has one of the Georgia’s greatest concentrations of gopher tortoises with about 2,000 roaming the 6,800-acre conservation area. The tortoise is a keystone species with an estimated 300 other species – snakes, spiders, lizards and frogs – dependent upon its burrows for protection.

The gopher tortoise ranges from South Carolina to Louisiana inhabiting open longleaf pine forests, sandhills, and scrub habitats that provided the sandy spoils for burrowing and groundcover vegetation for food. Today, though, less than 5 million acres of longleaf remain. Restoration of the pine and the tortoise go hand in hand, particularly at Alapaha under the supervision of Hugh Lentile, the tract’s former owner, since 2000.



An open pine stand at the Alapaha WMA provides habitat for gopher tortoise. Photo by Roy Hewitt, USFWS>

The Service unveiled a range-wide conservation strategy for the tortoise in 2013. The tank-like critter, with powerful legs and Yoda-like visage, is threatened by tree farms, urbanization, phosphate and sand mining, disease, coyotes, wild boars and loss of longleaf pine stands and their controlled burns that nourish the tortoise's ecosystem.

Its status is threatened west of the Mobile and Tombigbee rivers. It is a candidate species east of the rivers and, therefore, subject to intensive efforts to be kept off the endangered list. A decision is expected by 2023 – enough time, wildlife enthusiasts hope, to conserve populations of the species to ensure its long-term viability.

Conserving key habitats and populations is critical to the rangewide tortoise strategy. This WMA, financed by the Department of Defense, U.S. Forest Service, Georgia DNR, the Service and the Knobloch Family Foundation, underscores the need for partnerships to achieve conservation goals.

Reptiles like the tortoise aren't the only beneficiaries. Alapaha is the only public hunting ground in this corner of Southwest Georgia. And spring turkey season is starting.

"For folks not leasing land for hunting – which can cost \$2,000 or \$3,000 a year – this is the place to go," said Thompson who manages the state's newest WMA. "This place is special for non-hunters too, like bird watchers and hikers. The recreation potential here is huge."

Investing in the tortoise's future



A baby gopher tortoise affectionately referred to as "Bob". Photo by Chris Potin, Mississippi Army National Guard.

The roar of a distant jet soon punctured the country calm. Moody Air Force Base, and its squadron of A-10 "Warthogs," is 50 miles away. Moody could, conceivably, partake in the tortoise credit strategy. The Army, though, with Forts Benning and Stewart, each about 125 miles from Alapaha is a better bet.

The military and the Service's Southeastern office, joined by wildlife agencies in Alabama, Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, developed the credit strategy to afford military installations across the tortoise's range the opportunity to bolster its population without impinging upon military missions.

The strategy doesn't work without upfront pre-listing investments, akin to savings account deposits, in this case the Alapaha WMA with its wealth of gopher tortoises. The Army needed first to help establish conservation area at Alapaha. Its tortoise account now holds many credits.

Say, for example, Fort Benning needs more room for tank maneuvers. And the new territory is home to dozens of adult gopher tortoises. Well, it's impractical to round up all the tortoises and

ship them to a safe new home. So the possible incidental take of the tortoises will be compensated with tortoise credits – two credits per impacted tortoise. (A relocated tortoise equals one credit.)

Even if pre-listing efforts don't succeed, and the tortoise needs the ESA's protection, the military avoids future restrictions. It's good faith; up-front effort to stockpile credits, buy the branches "regulatory predictability" without hindering future military training.

"We're hoping this strategy provides a model for other species and other regions of the country," said Ryan Orndorff, Deputy Program Director for Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration, or REPI, at the Pentagon. "We can work collaboratively and proactively to help benefit conservation and our mission."

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Tags

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- Georgia
- Gopher Tortoise
- Longleaf Pine
- Military
- South Carolina



Dam going, nature returning

Saving an Endangered Southern River



