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NEWS RELEASE

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Desert tortoises truly in need of adoption

Holding facilities are at capacity, hundreds of tortoises need good homes

PHOENIX – A unique, fascinating, low-maintenance and educational pet can be had through the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Tortoise Adoption Program, conducted in partnership with the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and the Phoenix Herpetological Society.

If you have a yard, but little time for a dog, this well-mannered critter might be just the answer to having a household companion.

Desert tortoises are protected in Arizona and cannot be legally collected from the wild, but breeding of captive tortoises and the return of tortoises by owners who can no longer care for them has led to a surplus of these unique animals at authorized adoption facilities. The facilities are at capacity and are seeking people willing to adopt and care for a tortoise.

"The Game and Fish Department receives hundreds of unwanted adult and captive-born tortoises each year, which takes away resources for conservation efforts of wild tortoises," says Cristina Jones, Arizona Game and Fish turtle biologist. "That is one reason we discourage captive breeding and only allow adoption of one tortoise per household."

Contrary to many people's initial assumptions, desert tortoises can be interactive and provide companionship without as many demands as a dog or cat. Tortoises can teach many of the same life lessons to children, including responsibility, compassion and commitment.

To adopt a desert tortoise, you will need to have an enclosed area in your yard free from potential hazards, such as a dog or an unfenced pool. You will need to construct a burrow for the tortoise so that it can get relief from extreme temperatures. Those interested in sharing their yard with a tortoise should visit www.azgfd.gov/tortoise for more information on feeding, caring for, and creating a habitat for a tortoise. The desert tortoise adoption packet, which includes the adoption application, can also be downloaded from that web page.

If you are interested in adopting a desert tortoise, and live within the tortoise's native range (Phoenix, Tucson, Bullhead City, Kingman, Lake Havasu, and Yuma areas), send your completed application form to your nearest state-sanctioned desert tortoise adoption facility (Scottsdale, Tucson, Kingman or Yuma). A link to contact information can be found at www.azgfd.gov/tortoise.

Schools are encouraged to consider applying for a Schoolyard Grant through the Heritage Fund Schoolyard Habitat Program to build a desert tortoise enclosure and then apply for a tortoise adoption. For more information on Heritage Fund Schoolyard Grants, please contact Robyn Beck, Heritage Grants coordinator, at (623) 236-7530.

“Once captive, desert tortoises can never be released into the wild,” Jones emphasized. “Not only is it illegal, it can jeopardize wild populations through the introduction of disease, or displace wild tortoises.”

Desert tortoises can live as long as 50 to 100 years. They grow to be about 15 pounds and hibernate in the winter months. They eat plant material, including grasses and wildflowers.

The Tortoise Adoption Program is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

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Note to media: Photos and video of desert tortoises are available by calling Public Information Officer Tom Cadden at (623) 236-7392. Interviews with a biologist and live shot opportunities are also available.

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