

# Local group formed to protect gopher tortoises

By HEATHER CIVIL [heatherc@nwfdailynews.com](mailto:heatherc@nwfdailynews.com)

Plans to move a colony of 50 gopher tortoises living near a construction site in north Walton County have spurred a grassroots effort to raise awareness about the animals.

The tortoises currently live on land that the county needs for its new jail.

As soon as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission issues a permit to move the reptiles, they will go to Nokuse Plantation, a 53,000-acre conservation area near Freeport owned by South Walton businessman M.C. Davis.

Without another place to go, the tortoises, which the state lists as a species of special concern, would have been killed.

Their story sparked interest among locals who are forming a group dedicated to protecting gopher tortoises.

The as-yet-unnamed group will hold an organizational meeting from 6 to 8 p.m. today at the Coastal Branch Library on U.S. Highway 331 South. The public is invited.

Davis, one of the group's founders, said that members want to encourage people to protect the tortoise in Walton County and in the Panhandle.

"We're just trying to explain what we see and what the situation is," Davis said.

Noted biologist Matt Aresco from Florida State University will speak at the meeting. Dubbed by some people as "the turtle guy," Aresco has spent years researching the gopher tortoise and its relatives.

"Tortoises have been around a long time," he said. "They can live well over 50 years."

The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission allows developers to destroy the gopher tortoise and its habitat in exchange for a "take" fee meant for future species protection.

About 80,000 gopher tortoises have died as a result of that policy in Florida during the past 14 years, Aresco said.

Most die from starvation or suffocation because they are buried alive, he said.

Davis hopes that his group can get enough momentum going to convince the FWCC that relocation is the only option for the tortoise.

The gopher tortoise is an upland dweller that lives in extensive burrows made in sandy soil. No one really knows how many of them live in the area, Aresco said.

They are slow to reproduce and therefore slow to recover from losses, Aresco said.

Meg Nelson, also a founder of the tortoise protection group, said that she wants to teach people about the animals so that they can protect and rescue them from developers who would destroy their habitat.

"The gopher tortoise is a fairly humble species," she said. "It has been overlooked for a long time."

The FWCC this year may reclassify the gopher tortoise as "threatened," but it is unclear whether the agency's policy on "takes" will change with that.

Part of what makes the tortoise an important species is that its burrows are used by 350 other species for homes and shelter, Aresco said.

Destroying the tortoise habitat also destroys habitat for hundreds of other animals, he said.

"It's cheaper to relocate them," he said.

Daily News Staff Writer Heather Civil can be reached at 267-8300.

## **WANT TO GO?**

Florida State University biologist Matt Aresco will give a talk about the gopher tortoise from 6 to 8 tonight at the Coastal Branch Library on U.S. Highway 331 South in Walton County. The public is invited.