

Research Team Goes to the Dogs

Canines help survey the number of tortoises in the desert.

Posted: January 11, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

A research team at the Desert Research Institute in Reno, Nev., uses a unique tool to help survey the number of tortoises on the desert floor – dogs.

At present, the only way to survey tortoises is the time-consuming and labor-intensive method of laying out a grid on the desert floor and walking among the cactus and scrub trying to find the reptiles.

So the research institute has turned to using dogs that normally sniff out explosives, drugs or cadavers to see if they can help survey for tortoises.

“The dogs were much better at finding them under shrubs,” Mary Cablk, associate research professor at the Desert Research Institute, told the San Bernardino (Calif.) Sun newspaper.

“If you can find them, you can help conservation. The more tortoises you find, the more data you collect,” Cablk explained.

Currently, the research institute is conducting experiments, including planting tortoises, to determine how well the tortoise-sniffing dogs perform.