

Turtles and Burros Make SWR Headlines

By Mitford R. Fletcher

The top science news from the Southwest Region can be summed up in two phrases: "More on the Heartbreak Turtle," and "Feral Burro Roundup at Bandelier National Monument."

We reported previously on the reintroduction of the Atlantic Ridley turtle efforts, (*Park Science*, Winter 1982). The project has been going well and over the last six years we have received some 13,000 eggs from Mexico. The normal procedure is to collect the eggs directly from the turtles in Mexico, place them in styrofoam boxes filled with sand from Padre Island National Seashore, and transfer the sand-filled boxes and eggs to Padre Island in Texas. At the island, the turtles are hatched, imprinted, and transferred to the National Marine Fisheries in Galveston, Texas, for raising to approximately one year of age.

This year we received 2,006 eggs from Mexico and 242 hatched without incident. The remaining 1,764 failed entirely to hatch.

A number of possibilities may have caused this catastrophe. We are looking for the presence of pesticides heavy metals, or other environmental contaminants in the eggs and sand. We also are having the National Marine Fisheries culture and identify two

species of fungi and three species of colonial bacteria which may be implicated in the failure.

We have researchers working to determine the embryonic stage of development at which death occurred. Turtle eggs are very susceptible to damage if they are moved during certain times of the incubation period. Whether this contributed to the death of the embryos will be determined when Padre Island and Mexican researchers get together to compare notes.

Although the situation does not mean a complete loss of a year's class, the fact remains that the 1983 class is comprised of only 230 turtles as opposed to the yearly program average of 1,600, and it may have a longterm effect on the reproduction structure of the Padre Island imprinted population.

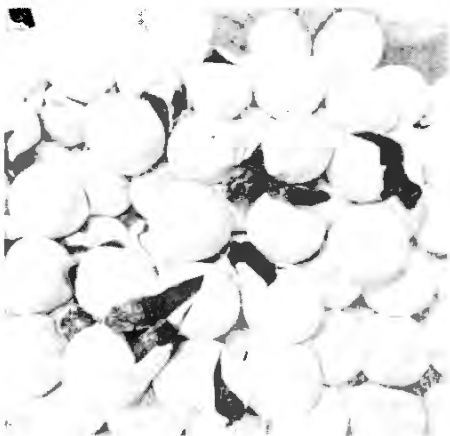
We are baffled over the cause of this failure, but every effort is being made to learn as much as possible from the incident. The program has been very successful during its first five years and we are committed to seeing the whole 10-year project through to its conclusion.

The removal of feral burros from Bandelier National Monument under an order by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver early in 1983 was begun on May 16, 1983 by the New York-based Fund For Animals, Inc. The Fund was allowed 60 days to capture and remove as many of the burros as possible before the NPS exercised its option of direct reduction.

A string of attempts, beginning with roping (which proved non-productive), the placing of snares along established burro trails (which netted one burro), tranquilizing dart guns (which involved expensive sling-loading by helicopter of the tranquilized animals and transportation to the corral), and pursuit by saddle horses and hounds - all were tried.

Eventually, 12 burros were verified by rangers as having been captured at Bandelier. Another 14 burros that appeared in the base camp corrals were not verified as having been captured at Bandelier. The 26 burros involved 634 NPS hours of monitoring and 968 total capture hours by the Fund for Animals. The capture hours worked out to 37 per captured burro.

It is our opinion that once the boundary fence is completed on the west side of the Monument (sometime in January 1984), there will no longer be a problem with feral burros.



Atlantic Ridley Turtles fight their way out of their shells.