Tortoises crack D.C.'s hard shell

Scripps Howard news Service
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WASHINGTON - “Oh, wow! Can I see?” exclaimed a congressional aide.

“Ooooh, you’re so cute,” cooed another aide.

In the hard-bitten world of Washington lobbying, not even the highest-priced, most well-connected hired guns get a greeting like that when they enter a congressional office.

But most don’t have scaly skin, a hard shell and an itty-bitty tail.

Davey, Jose, Tippy and Christmas have all three. They’re desert tortoises, the companions of Elden and Patty Hughes, a retired couple from Whittier, Calif., who share a passion for tortoise rescue and desert habitat preservation.

The Hugheses, their four tortoises in hand, have been visiting members of Congress and their staffs this week in an effort to build support for the federal purchase of 437,000 acres of Mojave Desert in Southern California.

The acreage is a patchwork of former Southern Pacific Railroad properties scattered within the National Park Service’s Mojave National Preserve and desert lands managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management.

The Catellus Corp., which manages the property, has offered to sell the lands for $54 million. The Wildlands Conservancy, a private conservation group, has pledged $18 million toward the purchase. Environmentalists are asking the government to come up with the remaining $36 million.

The land is prime habitat for the desert tortoise, which is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The tortoises can live to be 100 years old, but they reproduce infrequently and haven’t fared well in recent years. The slow-moving critters get run over by cars. They can’t compete with cattle for vegetation. Dogs chomp on them. And unfriendly humans have used them for target practice. As a result, there may be more tortoises in captivity now than living in the wild.

The Hugheses, longtime Sierra Club volunteers, began bringing tortoises with them on Washington lobbying trips in 1990, when environmentalists were urging Congress to protect federal lands in the Mojave.

When a bill designating 1.6 million acres of desert as a national preserve was approved in 1994, the Hugheses and some of their tortoises - they have 34 - were at the White House signing ceremony. The couple carry a picture with them of Scotty, an especially bold tortoise, crawling across President Clinton’s desk.

The tortoises are more than cute; they’re effective. Lots of people, from grizzled committee chairmen to bicycle messengers, will stop whatever they’re doing when the Hugheses show up and ask to hold the creatures.

“You never know who you are going to meet in the hall,” Patty Hughes said. “One time a man came up and asked to hold (a tortoise). When he walked away, he said, ‘You’ve got my vote.’ It turned out he was a congresswoman from New York.”

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“In the hard-bitten world of Washington lobbying, not even the most well-connected hired guns get such warm greetings as Desert Tortoises Davey, Jose, Tippy and Christmas”

(Scripps Howard News Service)

Elden Hughes of Whittier, Calif shows Congressman Bruce Vento (D-Minn.), tortoises. Davey and Tippy, in order to build support for the federal purchase of 432,000 acres of Mojave Desert. (photo by Evan Eile / Scripps Howard News Service)

Senator Dianne Feinstein uses tortoises as an example of why Nature needs protection (Staff Photo)

See “Telling the story”, page 16, in this edition of The Desert Report

Rebecca Greenberg who works in the House Appropriations Office, meets Xmas (photo by Evan Eile / Scripps Howard News)

Tortoise entertains Students at Weekly Breakfast hosted by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) (Staff Photo)

Elden and Patty Hughes with Congressman Bruce Vento (D-Minn) (Staff Photo)

Xmas and Jose enjoy a respite from Lobbying (Staff Photo)