

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## COACHELLA VALLEY FRINGE-TOED LIZARD PROPOSED AS THREATENED

The Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, a reptile noted for its remarkable adaptation to desert living, has been proposed for listing as a threatened species by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The action, published in the September 28, 1978, Federal Register, also identifies areas proposed as critical habitat for the species.

Scientists want to study the lizard, which lives only in sandy, desert areas of Coachella Valley, Riverside County, California, because they consider it to be one of the most completely sand-adapted creatures in the world. The species is also scientifically valuable because of its evolutionary relationship to the closely related Colorado and Mojave fringe-toed lizards which live in other desert areas of California and Mexico.

A variety of adaptations have enabled the 4- to 5-inch long Coachella Valley lizards to survive in their hostile environment. The name "fringe-toed" derives from tiny projections on the toes, especially on the rear feet, that enable the lizard to run easily over sand. Its eyelids are adapted to keep out sand, and its body is flat, which reduces wind resistance and aids the lizard in an unusual behavior called "sand swimming." When threatened, the lizard draws its front feet close to its body, dives head-first into the sand, and "swims" beneath the surface. Predators digging where the lizard dived in can't find it because it has swum away.

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It now appears, however, that the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard faces a serious threat to its existence--destruction of its habitat. The human population of Coachella Valley has grown from 12,000 to over 100,000 since 1940 and is still growing. By 1975, expansion of urban and agricultural areas had reduced the lizard's range from its historical area of 324 square miles to 236 square miles, of which only about 120 square miles is actually suitable habitat for the species. Growth in the area is expected to continue and could eliminate all of the wind-blown sandy habitat that the lizards need. At the present time, none of the lizard's habitat has been permanently preserved.

The invasion of a noxious foreign weed, the Russian thistle, and the planting of windbreaks to protect agricultural and urban areas are also changing the habitat, and it is not known what effects these changes may have on lizard populations. Off-road vehicle traffic and over-collecting by pet dealers may also pose threats to the species.

The areas proposed as critical habitat for the species are sandy areas in Coachella Valley that provide habitat for the lizards to feed, nest, shelter, and hibernate. Designating the areas as critical habitat under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act would affect only the actions of Federal agencies. These agencies would be required to ensure that actions authorized, funded, or carried out by them would not result in the destruction or adverse modification of the critical habitat of the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard.

Persons wishing to comment on this proposal should write to the Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240. All comments received by December 28, 1978, will be considered.