

# Gopher Tortoise Research at Camp Shelby

by Deborah M. Epperson

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), a reptile native to the southeastern United States, is declining in number throughout its range, primarily due to the degradation and loss of its habitat.

In 1987, the Fish and Wildlife Service listed gopher tortoise populations west of the Mobile and Tombigbee rivers in Alabama as threatened. This presented a challenge to public land managers, particularly the military; the Camp Shelby Training Site in southern Mississippi contains the largest population of gopher tortoises in the threatened portion of the species' range.

In 1995, the Mississippi Military Department entered into an agreement

with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks to initiate research on the gopher tortoise. The project, funded by the Defense Department's Legacy Resource Management Program, will evaluate potential military impacts on the gopher tortoise. Areas of study include population structure, reproductive success, hatchling survivorship, and the prevalence of upper respiratory tract disease. This disease has been a major factor in the

decline of the threatened Mojave population of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizi*) and could threaten the survival of the gopher tortoise, too.

*Deborah M. Epperson is with the Mississippi Natural Heritage Program in the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks.*

**Gopher tortoise**  
Photo by Harold Waalquist/USFWS

