

eCYBERMISSION Winner 2004 – Tortoise Project Update

Good Afternoon,

My name is Alyana and I was a member of 2004 7th Grade National Winning Team, the Bluestarz. I also sang the National Anthem at the Awards Banquet with a fellow team member. Since that time, I have continued my work with the project and Gopher Tortoise Conservation efforts. I wanted to share with you some of the project's most recent accomplishments since eCYBERMISSION was partly the reason I became involved with preserving this species.

One of the components of the project was a Gopher Tortoise Preserve on the Sawgrass Springs Middle School (SSMS) campus. Because of the Preserve's extreme success, an Environmental Learning Complex (ELC) was developed around it. The components of the ELC include: a butterfly garden, a recycled rubber-tire trail, a pavilion made of recycled material, and a garden center with a hydroponics lab. In October 2007, I mentored and accompanied a group of SSMS students to San Diego, California to receive an Environmental Excellence Award from SeaWorld, Busch Gardens, and Fuji Film.

Over the past few years, we have had several hatchlings. Working with JoAnn Cantlupe, the school's Magnet Coordinator, I have begun blood testing the oldest hatchlings. A licensed veterinarian has conducted these tests for Upper Respiratory Tract Disease - which is caused by a bacterium unique to the species. The parents of these hatchlings were positive for the disease, so we were delighted to find out that the babies were negative. This means that saving infected adult tortoises is a worthwhile cause because their young can potentially be disease-free!

We intend to test all of the hatchlings and find out if the disease is in fact not heritable. If so, we are looking into establishing a preserve in a local park that is specifically for only healthy, blood tested Gopher Tortoises.

Part of the reason that I am contacting you is that I would like to somehow express to current and future eCYBERMISSION teams that there is so much more that can be done with a project after submitting it for judging. I would love to speak out about the fact that our youth can make a difference by simply continuing with a project that they are passionate about. If you have any ideas on how I can do this, I welcome your feedback.

I would also like you to know that, to this day, I still marvel at my medallion and coins that I received during my Washington D.C. experience. It was truly life-changing.

Thank-you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully,

Alyana