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Arkansas Moves Toward Ban on Unlimited Commercial Trapping of Wild Turtles

Thousands Have Been Caught, Sold From State Waters

LITTLE ROCK, Ark.— In response to a petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and several Arkansas-based environmental organizations, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has agreed to consider ending unlimited commercial collection of the state's wild freshwater turtles.

Under current law, trappers can legally collect unlimited numbers of 14 types of turtle to sell domestically or export to foreign food, pet and medicinal markets. Harvest records show thousands of turtles were caught and sold in Arkansas from 2014 to 2016.

“Arkansas’ turtles belong in the wild, not in shipping containers,” said Elise Bennett, a Center attorney dedicated to protecting rare reptiles and amphibians. “I’m hopeful officials will move forward with a ban to ensure the Natural State will always have its beautiful diversity of turtles.”

Arkansas allows turtle trapping in waters across roughly half the state, including the entirety of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers. According to self-reporting by Arkansas trappers, 126,381 freshwater turtles were harvested from 2014 to 2016. This harvest was geographically concentrated, with two-thirds of those turtles taken from only five counties. It also focused heavily on medium and large turtles, which are most important for turtle populations to reproduce.

Scientists have repeatedly documented that freshwater turtles cannot sustain any significant level of wild collection without population-level impacts and declines. For example, a study of common snapping turtles demonstrated that a modest harvest pressure of 10 percent per year for 15 years could result in a 50 percent reduction in population size. And an Arkansas study found that turtles from populations in heavily harvested areas were significantly smaller than those from areas where harvesting is not permitted.

“The commission has taken an important step toward protecting Arkansas’ turtles from unlimited harvesting, but the next steps are critical,” said Glen Hooks, director of the Arkansas Sierra Club. “A growing number of states are taking sensible, science-based action aimed at protecting these populations. Arkansas should do the same, and we look forward to helping make that happen.”

If Arkansas bans collections, it would join a growing number of states preserving important wildlife and natural resources. In February Missouri banned commercial turtle trapping, and in March Texas proposed a ban. In 2017 New York ended commercial collection of diamondback turtles, Nevada halted commercial

reptile collection, and Iowa reined in trapping with new harvest limits. All of these actions were in response to work by the Center for Biological Diversity.

“We need to keep our wild turtles here in Arkansas where they help keep our rivers clean and healthy,” said Debbie Doss, director of Arkansas Watertrails Partnership. “I’m glad Arkansas officials are considering rules to protect Arkansas’ turtles and I’m hopeful they will follow through.”

The petition to end unlimited wild turtle trapping in Arkansas was submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity, Arkansas Sierra Club, Arkansas Watertrails Partnership, Audubon Society of Central Arkansas, Environmental Resources Center, Kory Roberts and John Kelly, a biologist who recently studied Arkansas’ turtle harvest.

Background

As part of a campaign to protect turtles in the United States, the Center has been petitioning states that allow commercial turtle collection to improve their regulations.

In February Missouri banned commercial turtle harvest. In 2017 Iowa adopted new regulations setting closed seasons and possession limits for commercial turtle trappers. In 2012 Georgia approved state rules restricting commercial turtle collection and Alabama completely banned it. And in 2009 Florida banned almost all commercial turtle collection from public and private waters.



Common snapping turtle photo by Dakota L. This image is [available](#) for media use.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.6 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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