

# UNSUSTAINABLE COMMERCIAL HARVEST OF SOUTHERN FRESHWATER TURTLES

## Population Declines of Wild Turtles

**W**ildlife exporters and dealers are commercially harvesting massive and unsustainable numbers of wild freshwater turtles from the few southern states that allow unlimited and unregulated harvest of turtles. Commercial collection is leading to drastic population depletions of rare map turtles in Georgia and Florida and the loss of freshwater turtles from many streams in Oklahoma and Texas.

Commercial turtle buyers reported purchasing almost 750,000 wild-caught turtles in Oklahoma from 1994 to 1999, and more than 250,000 wild turtles captured in Texas were exported from a single Texas airport from 2002 to 2005.

Turtles are long lived, breed late in life, and have low reproductive and survival rates. Stable populations need enough breeding adults to offset natural mortality and human impacts. Removal of just two adult turtles from a wild population could cut that population in half in as few as 50 years. Commercial collecting of wild turtles intensifies the effects of water pollution, road mortality, incidental take from fishing, and habitat loss, which are already contributing to turtle declines; scientists warn that freshwater turtles can not sustain any significant level of harvest from the wild without population crashes.



Photo courtesy USGS

Barbour's map turtle

## Contaminated Turtles Sold as Food

**M**ost wild turtles harvested in southern states are exported to supply food markets in Asia, primarily China, and some are sold to seafood markets in the United States. Many of these turtles are harvested from streams under fish advisories due to aquatic contaminants that are carcinogenic or harmful to humans, such as DDT, PCBs, pesticides, mercury, and other heavy metals. Turtles bioaccumulate considerably greater amounts of aquatic contaminants than fish.

## TURTLES AT RISK

The Center for Biological Diversity has determined that nine southern turtle species may warrant protection under the federal Endangered Species Act: the Alabama map turtle (*Graptemys pulchra*), Barbour's map turtle (*Graptemys barbouri*), Big Bend slider (*Trachemys scripta gaigeae*), Cagle's map turtle (*Graptemys caglei*), Escambia map turtle (*Graptemys ernsti*), Rio Grande river cooter (*Pseudemys gorzugi*), Sabine map turtle (*Graptemys ouachitensis sabinensis*), Texas map turtle (*Graptemys versa*), and a subspecies of the western chicken turtle (*Deirochelys reticularia miaria*).

## The Pet Trade

Adult turtles are harvested from the wild to breed hatchlings in captivity for the international pet trade. International turtle dealers solicit huge numbers of wild turtles from American sources on the internet. A single dealer can employ a virtual army of hundreds of interstate turtle collectors to conduct unlimited turtle harvest in states where commercial harvest is still legal.

A dozen species of colorfully patterned and rare map turtles are highly sought after by the international pet trade despite being protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. An adult map turtle can sell for \$150 on commercial Web sites. Many map turtles in Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and Georgia warrant federal protection under the Endangered Species Act, and two Mississippi species are already listed as endangered.

## Taking Action to Preserve Turtles

Conservation and health groups are seeking to end unsustainable commercial harvest of freshwater turtles in four southern states and to stop the export of contaminated turtles to international food markets. The Center for Biological Diversity and allies filed petitions with the states



Photo courtesy USFWS

Alligator snapping turtle

of Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Texas to ban commercial turtle harvest in public and private waters.

State wildlife agencies in Tennessee, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Alabama have prohibited commercial take of wild freshwater turtles. Wildlife biologists from states with bans have advised neighboring states to also ban harvest, since wildlife traffickers illegally collect turtles in states where they are protected and claim they were collected in states where harvest is still legal.

In 2007 Texas voted to end commercial harvest of turtles in public waters but continued to allow unlimited harvest of some turtle species from private waters. A petition was submitted in 2008 to ban *all* commercial turtle harvest in Texas, due to significant public health risk from consumption of contaminated turtles.



Photo by Darrell Senneke/World Chelonian Trust

Cagle's map turtle hatchlings

More information can be found on the Center for Biological Diversity's Web site: [www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/southern\\_freshwater\\_turtles/index.html](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/southern_freshwater_turtles/index.html)



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