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## States rethink turtle trapping

By: Judy Keen

SHEFFIELD, Iowa — Using a long pole with a hook on one end, Eric Eckhardt grabs a partially submerged mesh trap and hauls it out of a farm pond. Inside are a small soft-shell turtle and a 12-pound snapping turtle.

The live turtles go into tubs in the back of Eckhardt's truck. Later, after he checks other traps he set the previous evening, the turtles will be sold. He and his family eat turtle only occasionally.

Trapping is a hobby for Eckhardt, and the money he earns — 75 cents to \$1.50 per turtle, depending on the type and season — helps pay for family vacations. He averages four turtles a day in the summer.

For Eckhardt, 43, who works at a storm-door company, turtle trapping is a way to spend time outdoors with his son Cooper, 10, and daughter Georgi, 14. He isn't in it for the money, he says. Turtles "are fascinating," he says. "People make fun of that, but I don't care. I like them."

If the Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit conservation group based in Tucson, has its way, Eckhardt and others who trap wild turtles for commercial use will soon be out of business.

The Center has asked Iowa and other states to end unlimited commercial harvesting of turtles. As demand for turtle meat increases in Asia, where it is a delicacy, prices are rising in the USA, says Jeff Miller, a conservation advocate for the group. That's leading to the depletion of freshwater wild turtle populations.

"The demand for turtles in Asia is driving massive exploitation of wild turtles," says Chris Jones, a Huntsville, Texas, lawyer who works with the Center.

In Iowa, the turtle population "is not an unlimited resource, but if harvesting is done correctly, it is a sustainable resource," says Scott Gritters, a Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist.

In response to the Center for Biological Diversity's petition, the fisheries staff of the Iowa DNR reported that snapping turtles and painted turtles are "common, widespread and abundant" and recommended against a ban. The number of soft-shell turtles is declining and is "some cause for long-term concern," it said.

Individual trappers aren't necessarily making more money because of high demand, Jones says, but buyers who purchase turtles from people such as Eckhardt and from commercial



By Andrea Melendez, The Des Moines Register  
Eric Eckhardt holds a turtle he caught recently in Sheffield, Iowa, as his son, Cooper, 10, watches. A conservation group wants Iowa to end the unlimited commercial harvesting of turtles.

turtle farms sell to exporters for up to \$15 a pound.

Miller says 250,000 to 1 million turtles are exported each year and some are contaminated with mercury, pesticides and PCBs.

### Lax rules for turtle harvesting

The Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups last year petitioned regulators in Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma and Texas to ban commercial turtle harvests. Oklahoma put a three-year moratorium in place, and Texas barred commercial harvests in public waters.

This year, the center petitioned the only states with unrestricted harvests or rules it considers too loose: Arkansas, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, South

Carolina, Tennessee. This spring, South Carolina placed limits on turtle harvests.

A ban on commercial harvesting of Florida's freshwater turtles takes effect Monday. Bill Turner, a Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission turtle biologist, first heard reports of large turtle harvests from Florida lakes in March 2008. Up to 150,000 soft-shell turtles were exported from the state each year for the past five years, he says. There are 25 active commercial turtle farms in the state.

Because turtles breed late in their lifespan, Turner says, the removal of so many of them "destabilizes the population."

Wisconsin reached the same conclusion in 1998, says Adam Collins of that state's Department of Natural Resources. Because of declining turtle populations, the state established a July-November

turtle harvesting season and set a daily limit.

"Our standards ... are designed to ensure their long-term sustainability," he says.

In Iowa, 'the market is there' for turtles

Iowa's commercial harvesters are licensed and must report monthly the number of turtles they collect. Last year, Gritters says, they reported catching about 22,000 turtles, or 230,000 pounds. In Iowa, only snappers, soft-shell and painted turtles can be caught, using traps, hooks, or hooks and line.

Recently, Gritters says, "there's been quite an influx of new trappers because the market is there." As newcomers join the hunt — 175 commercial licenses were issued this year, up from 164 last year — more regulations likely will be needed, he says.

Jake Robertson of Storm Lake, Iowa, who harvests 20,000 to 30,000 pounds of turtle a year, agrees. In the decade that he's been trapping turtles, Robertson has seen no population decline.

Unlike fish, which are stocked in many Iowa lakes and streams, turtles are self-sustaining, he says. "Turtles are probably doing better than other aquatic species out there," Robertson says.

Eckhardt, who has a dozen \$50 traps, catches turtles on private property — with permission and often at the invitation of landowners who consider them a nuisance.

Talk about the shrinking turtle population worries him, he says. "We've got to find out first how many are out there," he says, "and if they do need protecting, by all means protect them."