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### At-risk turtles face fate as pets, soup

By Teresa Stepzinski,  
*The Times-Union*

BRUNSWICK - Velveeta is blissfully unaware of a potentially bleak fate she and her freshwater kin face in the wild.

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The plucky pancake-like softshell turtle is safe at the Georgia Sea Turtle Center on Jekyll Island, where the veterinary staff is nursing the 3-year-old back to health from an infection.

But her species and many other freshwater turtles native to Georgia risk a future as food in overseas markets or as pawns in the global pet turtle trade, state wildlife biologists and riverkeepers in Southeast Georgia said.

Georgia has 19 species of freshwater turtles, six of which are protected by state law. That's not enough protection, which translates into bad news for turtles, the ecosystem and people, the biologists and conservationists said.

Their concern is two-fold. Native freshwater turtle populations will be depleted by continued unlimited and unregulated harvest. In addition, meat from wild turtles is likely to be contaminated with pollutants such as mercury, PCBs or other toxins, posing a public health risk, they said.

"They are all vulnerable if you include the pet trade, meat trade and traditional folk medicine market," said John Jensen, a senior wildlife biologist for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. He said the common snapping turtle and softshell turtles are most often targeted for overseas markets.

"Every part of the turtle is used either for meat or for some sort of crazy type of home remedy for ailments, real or imagined," he said.

Conservationists, natural resources officials and turtle center Director Terry Norton, a wildlife veterinarian, share a common goal of protecting the state's turtles from over-harvesting.

"We're thoroughly in favor of sustainable harvest of any animal or plant. But when you have a recipe for disaster, you don't keep on baking the cake," Satilla Riverkeeper Gordon Rogers said.

#### Regulation efforts

Rogers, along with the neighboring Altamaha Riverkeeper, the California-based Center for Biological Diversity and the Center for Food Safety in Washington, D.C., petitioned state officials in March to regulate the harvest of wild turtles in Georgia.

Natural resources officials are drafting recommendations to monitor and manage the harvest of turtles. They will

hold a stakeholder meeting Sept. 18 in Macon to discuss the proposed regulations, Jenson said.

Protective measures are needed sooner rather than later, said Rogers, also a biologist.

"We know the demand for certain species is very high, and that certain species command a high price," Rogers said.

Because turtles don't breed until late in life and have low reproductive and survival rates, they are vulnerable to over-harvest. Once a population is depleted, it takes many years for the species to recover, he said.

"It's the perfect life history to be exploited," Rogers said.

Losing turtles also means losing an environmental sentinel, said Deborah Sheppard, executive director of the Altamaha Riverkeeper.

"A healthy turtle population reflects a healthy river system. Turtles are stressed in many ways by issues that also affect water quality in the river system," Sheppard said.

Jenson said many turtles trapped in Georgia and other southern states are exported to food and traditional medicine markets in Asian countries, primarily China, which once had the most diverse variety of turtle species in the world.

"They've pretty much eaten all their turtles to the point of extinction," Jenson said. "Now they've turned to the southern United States for its diversity of turtles."

Rare turtles or those with colorful shell patterns are prized by collectors. Adult wild turtles also are captured to breed hatchlings later sold in the international pet trade. Removing even a few adult turtles from the wild can lead to population crashes, biologists and conservationists said.

#### Most species unprotected

Georgia law allows the unregulated and unlimited harvest of freshwater turtles except for six species protected as rare, endangered or threatened, said Mike Harris, chief of the Nongame Conservation Section.

Although they know its happening, state officials don't know how many turtles are taken, nor how often. Harvesters aren't required to report how many turtles they take. Unless they volunteer that information, the state has no way to find out, Jenson said.

They've received little information or feedback about the state's turtle trade despite efforts, officials said.

"Nothing is wrong with some utilization of the wildlife resource. But unregulated and unlimited utilization is wrong," said Harris.

Proposed regulations include establishing harvest limits, requiring harvest licenses and banning or limiting the export of caught turtles.

"We will have provisions allowing private landowners to regulate the turtles in their ponds, but the sale and transport of those turtles would be subject to state regulation," Harris said.

But before any turtle rules can be imposed, the General Assembly must give the natural resources department the authority to regulate the harvest, possession, sale and transportation of the turtles.

Jenson said they hope the General Assembly will take up the matter when it reconvenes next year.

Regulating the turtle harvest is as much about public health as it is conservation, Rogers and Sheppard said.

Turtles accumulate pollutants such as mercury, pesticides and other contaminants from the water. Eating their meat can sicken people, they said. The bottom line, Rogers said, is protecting people and turtles.

"We're not talking about whacking somebody's entire operation. We're talking about wise use of a natural resource," Rogers said.

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