

## County trapper says turtle data not credible

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MOULTRIE — Is there a snapping turtle shortage in South Georgia?

That's what conservation and food safety groups, including two river conservation groups say, but Colquitt County trapper Kirk DeKalb begs to differ.

The four groups --the Center for Biological Diversity, Satilla Riverkeeper, Altamaha Riverkeeper and the Center For Food Safety -- have filed an emergency petition seeking to repeal the state's turtle collection law.

In the petition to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the groups claim that Georgia's turtle species are dropping because of unlimited harvesting, and that human consumption of turtles is dangerous because of contamination of the state's waterways.

"Georgia law currently allows an unlimited number of freshwater turtles to be harvested from the wild and sold as food," the petition said. "Under this regime, every non-protected freshwater turtle that exists in Georgia can be legally collected and sold. Unregulated harvest and commercial collection are rapidly depleting Georgia's wild turtle populations."

The petition said that conservation biologists have cautioned state wildlife officials that the turtle population in North America is being used as a source of turtles to supply China with turtles for consumption.

"Consumption of turtles known to be contaminated with toxins and pollutants poses a significant public health risk," the petition said.

DeKalb, who was tapped to represent turtle harvesters during a hearing next month on the petition, said that people interested in protecting turtles would be better served by supporting efforts to limit turtle predators rather than halting trapping of the reptiles.

"If they really wanted to do something to help the turtles they would petition for a longer raccoon hunting season," he said.

DeKalb, who has been trapping turtles four out of the last five years and has trapped beaver for 12 years, said he also challenges the notion that turtle numbers are falling precipitously. He said he has seen no dropoff, particularly in the Flint River and its tributaries like Muckalee Creek, which are among the seven or eight counties he works.

In addition, there are a number of quail hunting plantations along or near the Flint River and the Ochlockonee River. Those plantations are proactive in efforts to limit quail predators, which are among the predators of turtles, DeKalb said.

Also, in the past 15 years the number of ponds in Southwest Georgia has grown dramatically, and by 100,000 in the state, DeKalb said.

"Every time you create a new pond, you're creating places for turtles," he said. "There are so many turtles out there. Why create a new law when there are so many out there?"

The Department of Natural Resources' Web site seems to back up the petitioners on one point -- the pollution of the state's streams.

At Reed Bingham State Park Lake, the department's fish consumption advisory recommends eating no more than one meal a month of largemouth bass caught, and consuming no more than one meal a month of white catfish over 16 inches in length