

Mobtown Beat

Turtle Take-Down

Operation Shellshock takes aim at Turtle Deluxe

BY VAN SMITH



In New York on March 19, officials unveiled "Operation Shellshock," revealing that the January raid on a turtle factory on Maryland's Eastern Shore was part of a much broader international effort to enforce laws against black-market trading in protected turtles, rattlesnakes, and salamanders ("Fear the Turtle," Feature, March 18).

The New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) announced that the two-year undercover investigation, coordinated with federal agencies in the United States and Canada and state officials in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Florida, has resulted in charges against 25 people.

Michael Vincent Johnson, owner of Turtle Deluxe--the Eastern Shore factory--is not among those charged. However, the DEC press release explains that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Attorney's Office in Western New York "are pursuing Federal Lacey Act charges against a Maryland meat processor for the knowing purchase of illegally trapped New York State snapping turtles." An unnamed Louisiana processor is also targeted.

"Investigators found thousands of New York turtles being laundered through 'middlemen' in other states, then getting shipped overseas for meat and other uses," the press release contends.

"Our investigators began this operation with a simple question: Is there a commercial threat to our critical wildlife species? What they found was alarming," DEC commissioner Pete Grannis' statement reads. "A very lucrative illegal market for these creatures does exist, fostered by a strong, clandestine culture of people who want to exploit wildlife for illegal profit."

The charges in Operation Shellshock come shortly after the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) on March 11 petitioned eight more Southern and Midwestern states to ban commercial harvesting of freshwater turtles. Last year, the group asked the same thing of four other states--Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Texas--and "all have taken some level of action, pending further study" of the issue, says CBD conservation advocate Jeff Miller.

Miller says that Operation Shellshock shows that "there is an interstate problem with this turtle market."

"Different states approach this differently, and then there are those who don't regulate the turtle harvest at all," he says. "So there are going to be increasing [law-enforcement] problems in those states that have regulations, and in those that don't, the result is to encourage poaching. It is time now to take a comprehensive look at this, and ban the export of wild turtles in the United States."

Turtle harvesters disagree. "Really, you should harvest them," says Tim Thomas, a Florida turtler who bemoans his state's temporary ban on commercial turtle harvesting, which went into effect this year. "You got to manage the population, or health problems can crop up, but the general public don't want that, so they're politicking it and putting us out of business."

Johnson's lawyer, Matt Esworthy, says it's too early to comment on the Turtle Deluxe raid and Operation Shellshock. But the owner of Harlon's LA Fish, a Louisiana seafood processor that has purchased turtles from Turtle Deluxe in the past, reacted to the news.

"Is it me?" Harlon Pearce asks, when told that the Operation Shellshock press release mentions an unnamed Louisiana turtle processor being targeted by the investigation. Then he says he knows who the likely target is--"there's another guy who does turtles down here, they came in about two years ago and took all of his computer records, so it's probably him.

"It's a shame," Pearce continues, "they're putting people out of business by over-regulating them."

As for CBD's petitions to the states, including Louisiana, Pearce predicts "the response will be that there is no need for emergency measures" to shut down the commercial harvest of turtles.

But Miller claims the harvesting involves "a few people who are taking what's supposed to be a public resource that is very sensitive to overharvesting, and we are going to lose those resources very quickly due to global demand, so we need to get a handle on it before that happens."

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