

Some concerned by jump in Iowa turtle trapping

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DES MOINES, Iowa -

Surging demand for turtle meat in southeast Asia has prompted a huge jump in trapping in Iowa ponds and streams, leading to concerns that populations of the reptiles could suffer permanent damage.

Between 1987 and 2007, harvests in Iowa increased from 29,000 pounds annually to 235,000 pounds. And during that period the number of licensed harvesters more than quadrupled to 175 people.

Fred Janzen, an Iowa State University professor who studies ecology, evolution and organismal biology, said he was alarmed by the increase.

"The biodiversity within this state will be so much poorer off for having these species essentially go extinct," Janzen said. "You lose an important component of your ecosystem. And you can have these unforeseen consequences when you lose an important component."

Concerns over the increased turtle trapping prompted legislation that has been approved in the Iowa House and is now in a Senate subcommittee. The law would require commercial buyers and harvesters to record their names and addresses, as well as species, quantity, pound, sale information and harvesting location.

Separately, the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity has asked officials in Iowa and seven other states to consider banning the commercial harvest of freshwater turtles.

The Arizona organization worked with 24 other conservation and public health groups to send petitions to the eight states, raising questions about the safety of eating turtle meat and calling attention to the number of turtles being harvested.

"People in states where there's either no regulation or lax regulations are literally strip mining streams," said Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the center. "We're going to see some pretty catastrophic results in terms of the number of turtles being taken. It's way beyond anything that's sustainable."

Iowa law limits the harvesting of rare turtles but has no restriction on trapping common snapping, painted or softshell turtles.

Officials with the Department of Natural Resources have 60 days to respond to the center's petition, whether they choose to pursue a ban or not. Officials must let the center know the agency's intentions and can also ask

for clarification of the center's data.

Trapping in Iowa and elsewhere has soared with increased demand from southeast Asia, where turtle meat is a delicacy. That demand has caused turtle populations to plunge in Asia, leading to increased payments and rising harvests in the United States, Janzen said.

In 2007, turtles in the U.S. sold for as high as \$1.50 per pound of live turtles and \$3.50 per pound for carcasses prepared for consumption.

Department of Natural Resources officials said they're concerned about overharvesting but are uneasy about seeking limits until they have a better handle on the turtle population. They said passage of the measure pending in the Legislature would help them understand what's happening to reptile numbers.

Martin Konrad, an executive officer in the Department of Natural Resources' fishing bureau, said the bill also would make it harder for harvesters to underreport their yields.

"There is a level of concern within our department on the harvest of turtles," Konrad said. "But we don't have defensible data available to tell us that the turtle populations are declining and they are in need of greater protection than what we provide now."

Janzen said he worries that once turtle populations are depleted, it could take decades for a recovery to take hold even if harvests were sharply limited.

The petition sent to Iowa and other states – Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina and Tennessee – also raised health concerns about eating turtle meat. The groups noted that the sale of the meat was largely unregulated.

The Food and Drug Administration has no advisory against eating the meat, but Miller said that because turtles can live so long they can accumulate toxins such as mercury at a much higher rate than fish.

Snapping and softshell turtles, in particular, pose a greater danger as they often burrow into sediment and increase the risk of exposure, Miller said.

Janzen said if Iowans knew how much money commercial and private harvesters earned with very little overhead, they would be up in arms.

"The taxpayers in Iowa are getting basically nothing and these guys are making a mint, and destroying populations that may have extreme difficulty of ever coming back because of that slow life cycle," he said.