Sting operation targets illegal reptile trade

By MARY ESCH
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ALBANY, N.Y. — Dozens of endangered rattlesnakes hidden behind door panels of a minivan are smuggled over the Canadian border. Spotted turtles trapped in a New York marsh are sold over the Internet. Hundreds of snapping turtles from Hudson Valley streams are butchered in Maryland for sale to China.

Besides threats from habitat loss, encroaching development, climate change and pollution, reptiles and amphibians across the country are being harvested by commercial collectors to supply a booming market for pets and meat.

Wildlife trafficking is regulated by a patchwork of state and federal laws ranging from strict protection for endangered species to no limit in many states on collection of non-endangered, non-game species.

Even where regulations exist, enforcement often is lax because cash-strapped state agencies rarely devote scarce resources to the undercover investigations needed to catch reptile poachers - and poachers know it.

In New York state, after a preliminary investigation in 2006 revealed the extent of commercial trafficking in New York reptiles and amphibians, the Department of Environmental Conservation decided it was worthwhile to invest in a covert sting operation.

In 2007, the agency launched "Operation Shellshock," in which two undercover investigators spent nearly two years immersed in the "herp" culture - the trade in reptiles and amphibians, or "herpetofauna."

They trolled online reptile classifieds sites and forums, posed as vendors at reptile shows, and went on collecting expeditions with unsuspecting traffickers - one of whom was recorded by a hidden microphone boasting that he'd never get caught because officials will "never invest the kind of money to set up a sting operation."

Officials announced Thursday that the investigation has led to a range of violations, misdemeanors and felonies filed against 18 people under New York law, six under Pennsylvania law, and one under Ontario, Canada, law.

In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is pursuing federal charges against a Maryland meat processor for buying illegally trapped New York snapping turtles, and against a Louisiana turtle farm operator for buying illegally taken New York snapping turtle hatchlings and exporting them to China. Charges will be filed under the Lacey Act, which prohibits interstate and international trafficking in illegally collected animals and plants.
"One of the strongest reasons behind Operation Shellshock is the modern knowledge that these animals are ecologically significant," said Lt. Richard Thomas, who headed the investigation. "They're indicator species. They tell us the health of the planet."

A 2006 state law prohibits buying or selling - inside or outside of New York state - any of the state's native frogs, toads, snakes, turtles, lizards or salamanders. It applies even if an animal native to New York was bred in captivity in Florida and sold to someone in New York.

New York may not have the number of herps that warmer states do, but it does have species that are highly coveted by collectors. Hobbyists often start with the common and move on to the rare. Some are drawn to "hot," or venomous, species.

The scarcer an animal is, the more it's worth. A Massasauga rattlesnake, which is endangered in the U.S. and Canada, can sell for thousands of dollars on the black market. So can a bog turtle, which is so rare in New York that even the most devoted poachers seldom find them any more.

Much of the illegal selling uncovered by the sting went on at a show held regularly in a field house in the town of Hamburg in Pennsylvania Dutch country. While it's illegal to possess poisonous reptiles in New York, all manner of venomous snakes are legally sold at shows in Pennsylvania.

"We noticed that a lot of illegal buying and selling takes place between vendors, under the table," Thomas said. "They'll bring in a cooler or have a pillowcase under their coat. They'd have wood turtles, box turtles, spotted salamanders, copperheads, timber rattlesnakes."

The Internet has fostered a booming trade in reptiles, some legal and some not. In a herp forum, the investigators spotted a post from a Canadian man looking for a "trustworthy American" to trade snakes with.

It turned out the man wanted to trade Massasauga rattlesnakes, endangered in the U.S. and Canada, for timber rattlers, a threatened species in New York. At a shopping mall parking lot in Niagara Falls, the man removed 33 rattlesnakes from hiding places in his minivan.

"He was collecting gravid (pregnant) females from a distinct population in Ontario," Thomas said. "We believe he wiped out the entire population by taking the adults and juveniles."

The man was arrested by U.S. and Canadian authorities. About two dozen of the snakes, which were banged up in transport, were sent to the Toronto zoo to be nursed back to health so they could be released in the place they came from.

Besides depleting populations of animals, poachers often damage the habitat, using crowbars to crack open rocky crevices to get tortoises or snakes, or dumping gasoline to flush the animals out.

Common species are often collected in such large numbers that streams and ponds once teeming with turtles are left without any. The wood turtle, once common across
New York, has disappeared from much of its range because of its popularity among collectors who pay up to $600 apiece over the Internet.

Snapping turtles are in high demand to export to China. Adults are sold as meat, and hatchlings are sold to Chinese turtle farms where they're grown for the meat market. Thomas went along with turtle trappers who trucked hundreds of snappers to a Maryland slaughterhouse for sale to China.

He also accompanied poachers on Long Island who regularly dig up snapping turtle eggs as soon as they're laid, then hatch them in incubators. "They were sending thousands of baby snapping turtles annually to a turtle farm in Louisiana which can legally sell them to Asian markets," Thomas said.

Louisiana is the heart of the turtle industry, said Christopher Jones, an environmental attorney in Huntsville, Texas. Jones said collectors from many states drive truckloads of turtles to Louisiana exporters who keep them in holding ponds for shipment overseas.

The Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity and two dozen other conservation and health groups recently filed petitions with eight Midwestern and Southern states seeking a ban on commercial harvest of freshwater turtles in all public and private waters.

"Unregulated wildlife dealers are mining southern and midwestern streams for turtles for the export trade in a frenzy reminiscent of the gold rush," said Jeff Miller, spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity. Demand for U.S. turtles soared after China's turtles were hunted nearly out of existence for the Asian food and medicinal market.

The groups cite health concerns as well as ecological ones. Turtles sold as food domestically or overseas are often contaminated with dangerous levels of mercury, PCBs and pesticides.

"They're like miniature toxic waste dumps on four feet," Thomas said.

The groups are working on similar efforts to protect snakes, lizards, frogs and salamanders from excessive collection for the international pet trade, Jones said.

The goal of Operation Shellshock isn't to prevent people from keeping turtles or snakes as pets, but to crack down on commercial collectors, Thomas said.

"Our highest priority is to elevate the sense of respect, responsibility and awareness of these animals," he said. "Timber rattlesnakes are important not only for the ecological niche they fill on the rocky hillsides where they live, but also for providing us with that visceral sense that we still have some wildness left outdoors."