

Ohio turtles in danger of over-harvesting as Asia requests more meat

By: Kelly Ament

Posted: 4/3/09

When the students on Miami University's campus go to a dining hall to eat, none approach the server and say, "I'd like the turtle meat, please." Turtle meat simply isn't something most Ohio residents would ever think of eating.

According to Tierra Curry, conservation biologist at the Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit conservation group, Asia's turtle population has drastically decreased due to over-harvesting caused by the popularity of turtle dishes and the lack of enforcement for turtle harvesting. She said Asia is increasingly looking to the United States to harvest and export turtles.

"I suspect that the resources here can sustain a significant amount of collecting pressure," said Jon Costanzo, adjunct associate professor of zoology.

Costanzo said this is not the case with Asian turtles, which are less plentiful and most likely have more specific habitat requirements. In Ohio, he said, there is a wildlife officer assigned to every county, and it is doubtful there is a comparable high level of enforcement in Asia.

In Ohio, hunting turtles does not require a separate license because turtles are blanketed under Ohio's fishing license, according to Kipp Brown, fisheries biologist at the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Wildlife.

Brown said 685,374 Ohio residents obtained a fishing license in 2007.

According to Brown, since turtle hunting falls under this license, it is very difficult to determine and keep track of any increases in turtle harvesting in the state.

Since turtles are very secretive, most living underwater or in wooded areas, the total population is "tough to figure out," Brown said. However, Brown said turtles are "extraordinarily common" in Ohio.

According to Brown, Ohio has approximately 11 species of turtles. Of the 11 species, only two are legally allowed to be captured for consumption-the snapping turtle and the soft-shelled turtle. If these two species are caught legally, they are allowed to be sold. The seller must keep records for five years, with the names of the buyers and whether the turtles were given away, bartered or sold.

According to Sean Conner, park naturalist at Hueston Woods State Park, anyone canoeing in the area would see at least a few turtles along the shoreline. Conner said he has never personally seen anyone illegally catching turtles in Hueston Woods but said "it's not impossible."

Turtles can live approximately 150 years and have low survival and reproductive rates. The older females lay

more eggs than the younger ones. Harvesting turtles easily devastates the population when older adults are captured, Curry said.

The long lifespan of turtles contributes to their ability to accumulate higher amounts of pollutants present in their habitats. Pollutants such as polychlorinated biphenyls, dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT), pesticides, mercury and other toxic metals may be present in American turtles, Curry said.

Consuming turtle meat contaminated with pollutants could lead to grave human health concerns both in the United States and abroad, Curry said.

However, action is being taken to protect U.S. turtle populations and human health. According to Curry, the Center for Biological Diversity worked with two dozen other conservation and health groups to file emergency petitions to control turtle harvesting in eight states in 2009.

The emergency petitions were sent to Ohio, Kentucky, Arkansas, Iowa, Louisiana, Missouri, South Carolina and Tennessee, asking the states to ban all turtle harvesting in private and public waters. Curry said the Center for Biological Diversity also sent similar petitions to Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma and Texas in 2008.

Measures have also been enacted in Ohio to shield turtles from over-harvesting.

Brown said Ohio's turtle season, which is from early June to April 30, is "brand new." The season was created to protect Ohio's turtles during their breeding season, ensuring the turtles have a chance to reproduce and continue the species.