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Biodiversity: Is Florida a global hotspot for reptileextinction?

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Freshwater turtles, like this specimen in Butrint, Albania, are facing serious threats. *Bob Berwyn photo.*

Freshwater turtles among the most threatened species

By Summit Voice

A recent far-reaching study of the world's amphibians and reptiles finds that Florida is hotspot for environmental threats, with one of the highest concentrations of threatened reptiles in the world.

The new report highlights the need to address the global reptile extinction crisis: One in five reptiles is facing extinction from threats like habitat loss, overharvest and climate change.

"Florida is blessed with a rich diversity of lizards, turtles and snakes," said Collette Adkins Giese, reptile-and-amphibian specialist at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Unfortunately, threats like habitat loss from rapid development are continuing to push many of these rare reptiles to the brink of extinction."

More than 200 experts from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Species Survival Commission collaborated to study a random sample of 1,500 of the world's reptile species. Globally, one in five reptiles is facing extinction. The study also flagged the rapidly deteriorating plight of freshwater turtles, estimating that 50 percent of these animals are at risk of extinction.

"People tend to assume that, since reptiles have thick, scaly skins, they're pretty tough creatures that will do fine as the world changes. But in fact reptiles are quite sensitive to environmental change because of their very specific habitat requirements," said Adkins Giese. "This new study confirms that reptiles are facing a global extinction crisis that demands more aggressive action to curb threats like habitat destruction and overharvest."

The Center is working to gain Endangered Species Act protection for more than a dozen imperiled reptiles found in Florida. In 2011 the group filed the largest-ever Endangered Species Act petition focused solely on protecting U.S. amphibians and reptiles. It also filed a 2010 petition seeking protection for hundreds of aquatic species in the Southeast, including many rare reptile species. These rare Florida reptiles include the Barbour's map turtle, eastern ribbon snake, Florida Keys mole skink, Key ringneck snake and alligator snapping turtle.

Information via the Center for Biological Diversity

The **Barbour's map turtle** is found in wide, clear streams with swift currents and snags for basking in the Apalachicola River system of Georgia, Alabama and Florida. This turtle preys mainly on mollusks and insects such as caddisfly larvae; it can only survive in waters clean enough to support its prey base. Barbour's map turtles are threatened by commercial collection, dredging, pollution and disease.

The **eastern ribbon snake** (Lower Florida Keys population) is found on only a few of the mainline islands of the Lower Keys in Monroe County, Fla. Its freshwater wetland habitat is extremely limited and threatened by residential and urban development. The ribbon snake is black, with three yellow stripes, and gets its name from its very slender body.

The **Florida Keys mole skink** is a tiny lizard found only on sandhills and scrub of some of the Florida Keys. It usually occurs near the shoreline, in sandy areas where it burrows into soil. Its populations are declining primarily due to habitat destruction and overcollection.

The **Key ringneck snake** is a six-inch-long, nonvenomous resident of the Florida Keys, including Key West and Big Pine Key. These slate-gray snakes with muted neck rings face an ongoing barrage of unmitigated threats to the seaside limestone outcroppings and rockland areas they call home. Largely due to ongoing residential development, the snakes' rockland hammock habitat has been reduced by 98 percent, leaving highly fragmented population pockets.

The **alligator snapping turtle** was once abundant in U.S. river systems draining into the Gulf of Mexico, from the waterways and lakes of the upper Midwest to the swamps and bayous of Florida, Louisiana and Texas. But recent population surveys demonstrate the turtles now face declines of up to 95 percent, over much their historic range, from overharvest and unchecked habitat degradation. These slow-moving, largely sedentary behemoths are easy prey for hunters who still look to feed thriving world markets for the exhibition and consumption of the turtles.

For more information about the Center's campaign to stop the reptile and amphibian extinction crisis, visit http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/herps.