

Animal Planet

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Looks to Clamp Down on Illegal Turtle Trade

By Chris Sweeney Mon., Nov. 12 2012

There's a black market for everything, even turtles.

Last month, we told you about an extensive sting operation led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that took down a local yokel who was illegally smuggling turtles to China.

It turns out this wasn't a one-off incident. Turtle smuggling is a big problem, and millions of the shelled critters are plucked from nearby waters and shipped overseas for food and medicine each year. To get a better handle on the situation, the FWS on Friday announced that it plans on seeking stringent protection for three species of freshwater turtles.

"Turtle traders are depleting U.S. turtle populations at a frightening rate," Collette Adkins Giese of the Center for Biological Diversity said in a statement. "Commercial harvesting only compounds the daily problems native turtles already face from habitat loss, water pollution, and road mortality."

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, which spearheaded the push for protection, more than 2 million turtles are sent out of the U.S. each year. The group also points out that there are more types of turtles in the U.S. than in any other country.



Florida has seen a sharp decline in its turtle populations. In 2009, the state banned nearly all commercial harvesting activities of freshwater turtles.

The FWS is now looking to add the spotted turtle, Blanding's turtle, and the diamondback terrapin to a treaty known as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES. The meeting to do so isn't until March 2013, and it's unclear whether the turtles will muster the support needed for protection.

