



ATHENS BANNER-HERALD

Ga. officials limit turtle harvest with permits

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Associated Press - This undated photo released Thursday, Jan. 26, 2012 by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources shows a river cooter turtle. The Department of Natural Resources approved rules this week forcing people who take more than 10 turtles at a time to get a permit. (AP Photo/Georgia Department of Natural Resources)

By Ray Henry - Associated Press

ATLANTA — Georgia will start limiting the number of wild turtles that hunters can capture because of fears that increased demand for the animals from East Asia could harm local populations.

The board of the Department of Natural Resources voted Wednesday to require permits for anyone who takes more than 10 turtles at a time. The state will impose new limits on the number of turtles that permit holders can harvest.

The numbers vary based on the type of turtle. For example, hunters can take no more than 100 soft-shell turtles annually and no more than 1,000 pond slider turtles. Those rules will take effect in about a month.

Mike Harris, a DNR wildlife official, said turtles have not historically been heavily hunted in Georgia. He said environmental regulators worried that increased demand for turtles in East Asia, particularly China, could increase the number of people hunting them, typically with nets, and harm the population since there were no previous restrictions.

Some turtles are harvested directly from the wild. Others are used to stock commercial turtle farms. Since hunting turtles did not previously require a permit, state officials were unsure exactly how many are targeted.

"The basic concern is that over the last 10 or 15 years there's been a growing international market for turtles for the food trade, and we've had some of that going on in Georgia," Harris said. "With globalization ... the markets are worldwide now."

The Center for Biological Diversity, which has sought a ban on commercial harvesting, said the new rules were an improvement but did not go far enough.

"With extremely high catch allowed and no limit on the number of permits, the Department of Natural Resources can provide no assurances that turtle harvest will be sustainable, since turtles have low reproductive and survival rates," Jeff Miller, a conservation advocate with the center, said in a statement. "There are several troublesome exemptions, and enforcement depends on a self-reporting system with no mechanism for ensuring that harvesters even stay within those limits."