

Study: Snapping turtles even more at risk

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They took a while, but two new turtles just arrived in Florida, sort of.

The discovery deems the feisty turtles even more at risk, conservationists say. So the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity urged the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today (April 16) to protect the alligator snapping turtle, in light of the new research.

Alligator turtles grow to 200 pounds, are tough and live almost a century. They sport heavily armored shells, bear-like claws and powerful beaked jaws. In other words, they hold their own in the animal kingdom.

But the turtle needs better protection because of water pollution, overcollection for food, the pet trade, and other threats, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

The turtle is included in an Endangered Species Act petition the center filed with the



The alligator snapping turtle (Photo: Garry Tucker, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via Center for Biological Diversity)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in July 2012. The center and several renowned scientists, including E.O. Wilson, Thomas Lovejoy, as well as Kenneth Krysko — one of the new study's co-authors — filed a formal petition that year asking the federal government to protect 53 of America's most imperiled species of toads, salamanders, lizards, turtles and snakes.

The center's petition — the largest ever filed focusing only on amphibians and reptiles — asks the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service to protect seven snakes, six turtles, two toads, four frogs, 10 lizards and 24 salamanders under the act. Ten of the 53 species on their list live in Florida: the Carolina gopher frog; the key ringneck snake; Florida pine snake; Cedar Key mole skink; Apalachicola kingsnake; spotted turtle; short-tailed snake; southern hog-nosed snake; Florida scrub lizard; and the rim rock crowned snake.

More than 200 scientists sent a letter asking the service to review the status, but the

service has yet to act on the petition.

"This new study shows the extremely rare alligator snapping turtle is even rarer than we thought," Collette Adkins Giese, a Center biologist and lawyer, said in a release. "If we don't act quickly to protect these dinosaurs of the turtle world, they, too, could go extinct."

The study, published in the journal *Zootaxa*, was led by Travis Thomas, a researcher with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission.

The researchers revised the taxonomy of the alligator snapping turtle, identifying the two new species by analyzing the fossil record, modern turtle morphology and genetics.

According to the study, turtles farthest west in their range — river drainages of the Mississippi and Mobile rivers — remain as the alligator snapping turtle. Turtles from the Suwannee River system in Florida and Georgia are now the Suwannee alligator snapping turtle. Turtles from the

Apalachicola and other panhandle rivers in Florida, Georgia and Alabama are now the Apalachicola alligator snapping turtle.

"Now we know alligator snappers in the Suwannee River are a unique species found nowhere else in the world," said Adkins Giese. "And the much-needed Endangered Species Act

listing for these turtles would help ensure that the Suwannee River is protected for the turtles — and for humans."

Alligator snapping turtles were abundant in the early 20th century. But recent population surveys show they are likely extirpated in Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee, with declines up to 95 percent over much their historic range. Much of the decline has been attributed to overharvest and habitat degradation.