



WILDLIFE: FWS floats plan to monitor turtle trade

Dylan Brown, E&E reporter
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The Fish and Wildlife Service yesterday proposed measures that would ratchet up monitoring of trade in four turtle species due to rising demand for their flesh as food and traditional medicine in Asia.

If approved, common snapping turtles and three soft-shell species -- the Florida, smooth and spiny soft-shells -- would be listed under Appendix III of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

Unlike more restrictive CITES listings in Appendices I and II, the Appendix III listing would allow the United States -- home to more types of turtles than any other country -- to unilaterally monitor international trade in the species.

"It provides the lowest level of protection; however, here it would really make a big difference for these turtles because it would allow the U.S. to figure out exactly how many of these turtles are being traded," said Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney and endangered reptile and amphibian biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity, which petitioned for the listing in 2011.

Shipments with a CITES stamp, Adkins Giese said, draw the attention of inspectors, leading to extra scrutiny.

The aim of the rules is to determine whether state and federal laws are doing enough to ensure that overexploitation -- an issue the center has been raising for a number of years -- doesn't continue pushing populations in the United States toward the same fate as their Asian counterparts.

"It's really something that's been growing parallel to the turtles in Asia being depleted," Adkins Giese said. "That's really why many of these turtle traders have turned to native U.S. species because ones in Asia have really taken a hit."

According to the center, more than 2 million wild-caught live turtles are exported from the United States each year. The center began its effort to stem the tide in 2008, petitioning states to curtail their unlimited turtle catches.

Since 2009, Florida has banned nearly all commercial harvesting, Georgia has regulated its trade and Alabama banned the practice.

Still, increasing trade led three other turtles -- Blanding's turtles, spotted turtles and diamondback terrapins -- to be upgraded to CITES Appendix II protections last year.

The Florida soft-shell is native to the south-eastern United States, the smooth soft-shell can be found along rivers from Minnesota to Florida, and the spiny soft-shell ranges across nearly the entire continental United States. According to the center, the up-to-50-pound common snapping turtle, which ranges from Ecuador to Canada and all along the U.S. East Coast, is the second most exported species behind only red-eared sliders.

"Almost all turtles are threatened by harvest, and these ones in particular are proposed [for protection] by the U.S. because they are so abundantly traded right now and I think it's largely due to their size," Adkins Giese said.

International trade isn't the only problem facing the turtles.

"Commercial trade is just another threat facing these turtles that are already being hit by habitat destruction, water pollution and road mortality," Adkins Giese said.

The dual factors, she argued in a statement, have U.S. populations declining at a "frightening rate."

"It's got to stop soon or we're going to lose these incredible animals from the wild," she said.