

# The Charlotte Observer

FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 2015

## Hellbenders survive fungus, but pollution takes a toll

There's good news and bad about one of the strangest creatures to haunt the river bottoms of Western North Carolina -- the two-foot salamander called the hellbender.

A paper published last week found that the chytrid fungus that has devastated amphibians worldwide is widespread in mountain waters. But the fungus doesn't appear to be taking a toll on North Carolina's hellbenders.

Tempering that news is that the giant, flat-bodied salamanders continue a steady decline as they lose clean, clear water. Silt and sediment pouring into rivers smother the niches where hellbenders lurk.

In North Carolina, Eastern hellbenders are found only in rivers that drain to the Gulf of Mexico. They lurk under large submerged rocks and trees, feeding mostly on crayfish.

Biologist Lori Williams of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and co-author John Groves of the North Carolina Zoo found that about one-quarter of the



Eastern hellbender (N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission)

165 wild and 15 captive hellbenders they tested carry chytrid fungal spores.

They saw no evidence the fungus is causing the immune problems or inability to heal wounds that's been documented in the Ozark hellbenders of Missouri and Arkansas.

A lingering problem in North Carolina is that some people continue to kill the animals on sight, Williams said. The myth handed down over generations is that the slimy amphibians

-- sometimes known as "devil dogs" or "snot  
otters" -- are poisonous.

"I've even been told they're bad luck," Williams  
says, with fishermen who inadvertently snag  
one liable to throw away their gear.

It's illegal to kill hellbenders because North  
Carolina lists them as a species of special con-  
cern. The Center for Biological Diversity, an  
advocacy group, has petitioned for federal pro-  
tection under the Endangered Species Act.

The paper was published Dec. 31 in the journal  
Herpetological Conservation and Biology.