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Proposed turtle trapping restrictions sent to governor

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The Iowa Department of Natural Resources has proposed new daily catch limits for commercial turtle trapping in Iowa, drawing praise from environmental activists and scorn from trappers who make a living catching turtles.

“Iowa is finally clamping down on for-profit exploitation of its turtles,” Collette Adkins, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement. The organization initially sought a complete ban on commercial turtle harvest in Iowa in 2009. Adkins said she still would prefer to see a full shutdown of commercial turtle trapping, but considers the proposal “a big improvement over the unlimited, year-round commercial collection that is currently allowed.”

The Iowa Legislature earlier this year passed a bill requiring the DNR to set a harvest season and daily catch limits on turtles in an effort to more closely regulate the practice without shutting it down completely.

Iowa is one of only a handful of states in which trappers are able to take unlimited numbers of certain turtles year-round.



(Photo: Zach Boyden-Holmes/The Register)

That’s prompted concern from biologists, who worry about declining turtle populations.

The proposal, which still must be approved by the governor before going to the legislative rules committee, limits the number of turtles that trappers could take each day to 14 snapping turtles, one softshell turtle and three painted turtles.

It also sets a season on commercial turtle trapping that begins July 1 and runs through Dec. 31, with the goal of protecting turtles during their nesting season. The proposal also would prohibit trapping within 100 yards of a river or stream between July 1 and July 15 to protect early nesting of some softshell species.

Herpetologists point to a turtle's unique biology, which makes it especially vulnerable to things like over-harvest. Unlike other animals, turtles don't begin to reproduce until they're much older — about 12 years old for a snapping turtle. And there's a litany of natural factors that make it difficult for them to reach that age. Even though turtles may lay 40 eggs at a time, scientists estimate only 10 percent survive their first year in the wild because they're so heavily preyed on as eggs and as hatchlings.

Biologists say that's why it's so difficult to replace the vast numbers of adult turtles that are removed from the population through commercial trapping.

"Turtle populations appear to be in trouble," said Chad Dolan, a fisheries biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, noting the change could be related to a variety of issues, including changing habitats as well as commercial trapping. Zachary Boyden-Holmes/The Register

In 2014, the most recent year for which Iowa DNR data are available, trappers statewide caught a reported 17,504 turtles worth a wholesale value of \$272,869.

But some trappers said the changes likely will put them out of business.

"It in essence ends commercial harvest, because you can't catch enough to make it pay," said Michael O'Hearn, a trapper from Northboro who has been turtle trapping for 23 years. "It's kind of a back door way of taking away commercial harvest by limiting it to the point where it's not financially viable."

O'Hearn is one of 48 Iowans currently licensed as commercial turtle trappers. The number of trappers has declined significantly in recent years as the market for turtles has fallen. The number of licensed turtle trappers exceeded 100 during each of the previous five years.

O'Hearn estimates that turtle trapping has accounted for about one-fourth of his income some years, depending on the catch and market. He supplements that with other things, such as beekeeping. He says he'll have to find another way to account for the lost income.

"I got up at 4 the last two mornings thinking of how I can make this work," he said. "I don't have an answer."