

Bartlesville EXAMINER-ENTERPRISE

Organizations out to protect turtles

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TAHLEQUAH (TNS) — A new mission has surfaced among several Oklahoma-based environmental organizations, who have petitioned the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation today to end commercial collection of the state's wild turtles.

Organizations looking for change include the Center for Biological Diversity, Oklahoma Chapter Sierra Club, Save The Illinois River, and Local Environmental Action Demanded.

Turtle trappers are allowed to collect unlimited numbers of eight different turtle species from waterways on private lands for commercial use.

Even though wild turtle collection is a concern for these organizations, conditions for the creatures have worsened. The commercial harvest of aquatic turtles was first legalized in the late 1960s, and it was open for all species. There was little commercial activity until 1994, when a spike in turtle harvesting began.

The uptick occurred as a result of a population collapse for Asian turtles. Because several Asian cultures believe if a person eats a turtle, the turtle's longevity will be conveyed to that person, the Asian food and medicinal markets have driven most of the trade.

The Wildlife Department was eventually able to curtail some of the harvesting in 1994, by closing the season for the three rarest turtle species: Alligator Snapping Turtle, Chicken Turtle and the Northern Map Turtle. This didn't stop harvesters from collecting wild turtles, though.

According to reports submitted to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Coalition, commercial traders bought nearly one million wild turtles from Oklahoma between 1994 and 2014.

