



Group seeks to stop turtle trapping

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By Kenneth Heard, Sun Staff Writer

JONESBORO — An Arizona conservation group has asked the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to ban commercial trapping of freshwater turtles in the state, saying to do so will ensure species won't become extinct.

The Center for Biological Diversity in Tuscon, Ariz., released the letter Thursday, which includes signatures from 28 university professors, environmental agency representatives and wildlife experts. The letter also includes signatures from the Sierra Club's Arkansas chapter, Arkansas Water Trails Partnership, Audubon Society of Central Arkansas and the Environmental Resources Center.

The ban would not affect turtle farms.

"The science shows that Arkansas' turtle trapping regulations need to be amended to prevent turtle declines," the letter reads. "Under current state regulations, Arkansas residents holding the required fishing permits may collect 14 species/subspecies of turtle in unlimited numbers." This level of trapping puts wild turtles at risk."

Arkansas is the only state in the country that has no seasons or regulations for trapping turtles.

Eight species of turtles, including the alligator snapping turtle, the ornate box and the southern painted turtle, are protected by the state.

"Arkansas' laws create an unlimited harvest," said Elise Bennett, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's 'catch as many as you can.'"

Kelly Irwin, commission herpetologist, said 1.3 million turtles were trapped in Arkansas between 2004 and 2017.

Trappers sell turtles for pets, food and medical research and to natural medicine dealers who claim parts of the turtle have medicinal value.

The nonprofit organization made a similar request to the Game and Fish Commission in 2009 to ban commercial trapping of turtles, but was denied. The center was instrumental in obtaining a commercial turtle trapping ban in Missouri along with changes in trapping laws in New York, Texas, Nevada, Florida and Alabama.

Irwin said the commission will hold public hearings about the trapping request and should make a decision by mid-August.

Trappers mainly snare turtles in the Arkansas River Valley, the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers and in waterways, lakes and ponds in the eastern half of the state, he said.

“They [the Center for Biological Diversity] say the population will decline in the Delta,” Irwin said if trapping continues. “But there is so much water. There are so many ditches out there. There’s tons of common species. There’s water all over the place for turtles to live in.”

Marcus Balch, owner of Northeast Arkansas Turtle Farm, said he’s used hoop nets to trap turtles for more than 30 years. He sells turtles to universities that use them in medical classes, to pet stores and to food dealers. He has also trapped turtles when residents asked him to clear ponds in their neighborhoods and subdivisions.

“If they ban trapping, we’d have to quit,” he said. “I would have to close. It’s a shame if it did because a handful of people want to go turtle watching.”

Bennett said the decline in turtle populations due to trappings is detrimental to the public. Turtles eat dead animals that may contain bacteria harmful to humans. Turtles that are eaten by humans may have also ingested mercury or other toxins.

“A small number of people are catching a large number of turtles,” she said. “I fear that turning a short profit could hurt the [turtle trapping] industry itself.”