

my Statesman

Commentary: Support Texas ban on commercial trapping of wild turtles

By Tom Goynes and Jenny Loda
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In the past, when you paddled the many waterways of Texas, nearly every river bend provided a reminder that it's home to more kinds of lizards, snakes and turtles than any other state.

For freshwater turtles alone, there are 28 different types found here. Unfortunately, many of these are in decline. Now, scanning the riverbanks and fallen logs, it is clear there is far less variety among these fascinating animals.

That's why it makes no sense that a small number of people are allowed to profit off the unlimited commercial harvest and sale of turtles that belong to all Texans. It's time for state wildlife managers and the Parks and Wildlife Commission to put an end to this unsustainable practice.

Trapping hundreds of turtles each year degrades our natural resources. Most of those turtles are exported overseas — usually to countries that have decimated their own local freshwater turtle populations, and which are now depleting ours.



Turtles are among the nongame species whose chances for survival are of greatest concern for the state. They are already threatened by habitat loss, water pollution and vehicle traffic. They can't afford to be caught and sold for meat or as pets.

In 2007, state wildlife officials restricted commercial turtle trapping to private lands and waters — which might sound good, but isn't. That's because almost 98 percent of the state's freshwater water bodies are considered private. In other words, Texas allows commercial trapping throughout almost the entire state.

Commercial collectors caught more than 1,500 wild turtles from 2014 to 2016, according to state Parks and Wildlife Department's data. Currently, turtle trappers can legally collect unrestricted numbers of four types of Texas turtles on private property.

But, scientists have repeatedly documented that freshwater turtles cannot sustain any significant level of wild collection without population-level impacts and declines. One study of common snapping turtles demonstrated that a modest harvest of 10 percent per year for 15 years could result in a 50 percent reduction in population size.

A Texas study conducted after the 2007 regulations went into effect found that those new regulations hadn't gone far enough, and concluded that they are not likely to adequately sustain turtle populations.

That's why the organizations where we work, along with other Texas-based environmental groups, petitioned the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to end commercial collection of the state's wild turtles.

And, fortunately, the department's biologists appear to agree.

In a presentation to the Parks and Wildlife Commission this past spring, department staff presented their assessment, concluding that there is sufficient scientific justification to prohibit commercial collection.

Now, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has formally proposed a rule that will end commercial freshwater turtle harvesting. The Parks and Wildlife Commission will consider adopting the proposed rule at its Aug. 23 meeting in Austin.

If Texas bans commercial collection, it would join a growing number of states working to preserve their turtle populations. In March, Missouri banned commercial turtle trapping. In April, Arkansas agreed to consider ending commercial harvest of the state's wild turtles. Alabama, Florida, Mississippi and North Carolina have all banned commercial collection of native turtles.

Texans can't afford to lose these precious turtles from the wild. Beyond the joy of seeing one in its natural habitat, freshwater turtles perform critical functions as the principle scavengers of aquatic ecosystems. Without turtles to consume dead fish and debris, water quality can decline.

Texas' state biologists have done their part. Now, it's the Parks and Wildlife Commission's turn to act to protect the state's precious turtles. It's time for the state to ban this destructive practice and preserve our natural heritage.

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