

TAHLEQUAH DAILY PRESS

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

"Turtle trappers shouldn't be allowed to pad their pocketbooks by putting the state's precious wildlife at risk," said Collette Adkins, CBD biologist and senior attorney, who authored the petition.

Groups aim to curtail harvest of wild turtles



"For the sake of our native turtles and all of us who care about them, Oklahoma has to rain in exploitative turtle trapping."

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.

According to the petition, authored by Adkins, “most turtle species in Vietnam and southern China are endangered and turtles can no longer be found in the wild in Vietnam.”

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.

Five more uncommon turtle species have since been prohibited from harvested for commercial use, but Mark Howery, biologist at ODWC, said it’s too soon to tell how large of an impact it has made.

“Turtles have a very low reproductive rate,” Howery said. “There are other factors that control turtle populations, too. We’ve had several turtle predators who have increase in numbers – river otters and bald eagles. So I would expect it to be a decade or two decades before we see an increase.”

The organizations have also claimed that freshwater turtles cannot sustain a significant level of wild turtle collections without population declines.

“Commercial trapping is devastating to turtle populations that are already suffering from multiple other threats, including habitat loss, water pollution and vehicular collisions,” said Michael Beilfuss, executive committee chair for Oklahoma Chapter Sierra Club. “Unless the state bans commercial turtle trapping, Oklahoma’s turtle population will continue to plummet.”

According to Jena Donnell, wildlife diversity information specialist, the Wildlife Department has done everything within its authority to “limit” turtle harvesting, but it would take an act of state Legislature to close the state to commercial harvest.

“I am very pleased to say that our Department of Wildlife Conservation is doing as much as it can to regulate the commercial harvest of turtles,” said Ed Brocksmith, secretary-treasurer at Save the Illinois River.