



Commission to study turtle trappings

By Kenneth Heard,
Sun Staff Writer
Nov 24, 2018

JONESBORO — The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has restricted commercial trapping of all turtles on the St. Francis River in Clay and Greene counties and in the Gulf Coastal Plain in south Arkansas, responding to a petition filed by a conservation group in Arizona.

The commission agreed to conduct a three-year study from 2019 to 2021 to determine the effects of trapping on wild turtle populations in the Delta region where the majority of trapping occurs.

The regulations, prepared by commission Chief of Fisheries Ben Batten, close all trapping on the St. Francis River in Clay and Greene counties, ban the harvest of the Razorback Musk turtle statewide and require more stringent self-reporting by trappers to ensure more accurate numbers.

Trappers will also be limited in the number of permits issued. The commission will sell 150 permits per year.

“We are encouraged by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission’s effort to do something,” said Elise Bennett, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity of Tucson, Ariz.

The center asked the state’s game commission to ban commercial trapping of all turtles in June, saying to do so would ensure turtle species would not become extinct.

The center submitted a petition that included signatures from 28 university professors, environmental agency representatives and wildlife experts, along with signatures from the Sierra Club’s Arkansas chapter, Arkansas Water Trails Partnership, Audubon Society of Central Arkansas and the Environmental Resources Center.

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

Bennett said that number is likely to be more because some trappers are “under-reporting” their numbers.

“Being under the past regulations, it must be have been nice to be a turtle trapper in Arkansas,” she said. “It think these rules will help.”

Marcus Balch, owner of the Northeast Arkansas Turtle Farm in Amagon, said the changes won’t affect his operations — yet.

“We’re at a point in time that we don’t know what to expect in the long term,” he said. “I’m through if they decide to shut down trapping statewide. Who knows?”

Before the new regulations, trappers could legally collect unlimited numbers of 14 types of turtles to sell domestically or export to foreign, food, pet and medicinal markets.

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

Bennett said she felt the state’s move toward tighter regulations will continue after its three-year study is completed.

“I think they will get a better idea of how many turtles are killed,” she said. “Other states that have done studies like this implemented stronger rules after.”

In February, Missouri banned commercial trapping and Texas followed suit in August. Other states, including New York, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Nevada and Iowa have also either completely banned commercial turtle trapping or set new harvest limits.

“Studies from surrounding states have shown how sensitive these animals are to any reduction in numbers,” said Debbie Doss, director of the Arkansas Watertrails Partnership. “It’s my hope that this study will lead to better and more informed protections in the future.”