

The Post and Courier

Commentary: South Carolina must tighten state laws to protect turtles

BY ELISE BENNETT
and JORDAN GRAY
November 7 2019

Each year, tens of thousands of live turtles are stolen from America's woodlands and waterways and shipped overseas as pets or for meat. And with lax laws against harvest, South Carolina is a haven for turtle snatchers.

State wildlife officials recently saved more than 200 eastern box turtles from traffickers in Chester County. Last year, a Holly Hill resident admitted to illegally smuggling protected turtles through South Carolina. And several more recent poaching cases have had ties to the state.

These incidents underscore South Carolina's weak regulations, which fail to protect native turtles. It's time for the state to safeguard these important and slow-reproducing animals, whose populations just can't sustain this trapping.

Turtle smugglers target South Carolina to operate their illicit ventures because they know the rules are weak and difficult to enforce, so they can get away with it.

State regulations allow a person or group of people in a vehicle to take any combination of 10 turtles out of the state per trip, and up to 20 total per year.



Yellow belly slider turtles like these were being trapped in Orangeburg County in 2014, according to federal agents. A Holly Hill man arrested in the case later pleaded guilty to federal charges of illegally trafficking wild turtles.

This includes eastern chicken turtles, eastern snapping turtles, coastal plain cooters, Florida softshell turtles, river cooters, spiny softshell turtles and yellow-bellied sliders. The spotted turtle, a prized pet species, may be collected from the wild "for personal use" with a permit.

Making matters worse, the eastern mud turtle, eastern musk turtle and striped mud turtle are not even mentioned in the regulations, though they are targeted for trade in China.

Many Southeastern states have already banned commercial turtle trapping.

Alabama, Florida, Mississippi and Texas have all outlawed the practice. And although they don't have outright bans, Georgia and North Carolina protect turtles with clear bag limits.

Because more and more states are banning collection of wild turtles, South Carolina has become a more attractive option for both legal and illegal turtle operations. This also impacts other states.

When one state has weak protections, it threatens turtles in states where trapping is banned or regulated. Poachers smuggle illegally taken turtles into states with weak laws, where they can pass them off as lawfully taken. Or they sell them to a dealer who puts them on the market for illicit turtle trade.

South Carolina has become, in essence, a laundering state for illegal wildlife trade.

Scientists have repeatedly documented that freshwater turtles cannot sustain any significant level of wild collection without leading to population declines.

Researchers in a 2014 study found that no commercial collection could be sustained for softshell turtles, and common snappers could withstand only minimum rates of juvenile collection and no adult collection.

Another study found that a modest harvest pressure of 10 percent per year for 15 years of common snapping turtles may result in a 50 percent reduction in population size.

These findings should be sobering for South Carolina's wildlife managers and citizens alike. Until the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and state lawmakers ban commercial turtle harvest, traffickers will continue to target the state, chipping away at its wild heritage.

Elise Bennett works to protect imperiled reptiles and amphibians as a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. Jordan Gray is the communications and outreach coordinator for Turtle Survival Alliance based in Charleston