



## Officials are cracking down on turtle smugglers in Florida

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. – Florida wildlife officials are increasingly concerned the state's turtles are being scooped up by smugglers feeding an international demand for the freshwater and terrestrial reptiles.

Turtle launderers, who “wash” wild-caught animals through illegal trafficking rings like ill-gotten cash, have been targeted by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission since a 2009 rule banned the commercial harvest and sale of natural-born turtles.

Undercover investigations have since retrieved thousands of stolen turtles worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But FWC commissioners were told Thursday to be prepared for an uptick in criminal activity that may require tighter oversight as some coveted species become “literally worth more than gold.”

“International prices will continue to go up,” said Col. Curtis Brown, FWC’s director of law enforcement.



Turtles recovered by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2019 after undercover Operation Donatello discovered an illegal turtle trafficking ring. [Provided by FWC] (Photo: Provided by FWC)

“We have one of the most densely populated areas in the world for turtle diversity, which makes us a target for illegal trafficking.”

Florida has 23 land and freshwater turtle species. The most sought after include box turtles, diamondback terrapins, mud and musk turtles, soft-shell turtles and snapping turtles.

While fleshy softshell and snapping turtles are sold as food in Asian markets, box turtles and other varieties are popular pets that can fetch a Florida poacher up to \$300 each. In Asia, the same turtle can sell for as much as \$10,000 at glitzy auctions held near Shanghai, Brown said.

Between 2016 through 2019, about 6.5 million live turtles were exported from the U.S., including 521,700 from Florida.

“It’s a status symbol to have these in your home,” said Chris Lechowicz, wildlife and habitat program director at the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation. “Turtles are synonymous with long life. They are a big part of the traditions there (Asia).”

Despite 49 licensed Florida turtle farms and an unknown number of turtle breeders in Asia, Lechowicz said they can’t keep up with demand.

In the presentation to FWC commissioners, Brown noted a 2016 McKinsey & Company study that estimated 76% of China’s urban population will be considered middle class by 2022. That translates into bigger buying power that will “almost definitely” increase demand for turtles, Brown said.

It was 2005 when Florida noticed a significant increase in commercial turtle fishing. A rule passed four years later banned the sale of wild-caught turtles. Some species, such as the imperiled alligator snapping turtles and Suwannee cooters are illegal to take from the wild or possess. There are possession limits for other species such as box turtles and diamondback terrapins.

Lechowicz said the commercial turtle market began to grow in the late ’90s, but that land and freshwater turtles don’t always garner the same attention as their sea-faring cousins.

“Although sea turtles are threatened worldwide there are many other turtle species that are more at risk of extinction in the next century,” he said.

The 4-inch, federally threatened bog turtle native to areas from New York to Virginia can cost as much as \$13,000, Brown said.

“There are people who have whole rooms full of turtles. They collect them like postage stamps,” said George Heinrich, executive director of the Florida Turtle Conservation Trust.

Part of the concern about taking box turtles from the wild is they don’t reach sexual maturity until about 10 years old and then lay only four to six eggs per year in two hatching seasons. Box turtles can live to 80 years old and the survivability of the species depends on the adults breeding in the wild for many years.

In Operation Donatello, an undercover operation announced in October, FWC documented more than 4,000 turtles taken illegally and sold over a six-month period, including box turtles, Eastern box turtles, striped mud turtles, Florida mud turtles and chicken turtles.

Two men were arrested as part of the operation with turtles valued at \$200,000 on the black market.

Brown said the poachers used FWC’s own research to find areas with the highest turtle densities. They first targeted Edgmont Key south of St. Petersburg but reconsidered after a 2016 fire burned 80 acres of the island, killing some box turtles.

The traffickers then descended on Sanibel Island. Hundreds of turtles were found during the August 2019 bust. Lechowicz brought 275 back to the island.

Turtle farmers who spoke at the FWC commission meeting said more restrictions on turtle sales would only increase the black market demand.

Retired turtle farmer Jim Watt of Jupiter said prohibitions on snapping turtles “drew an X on that turtle’s back.”

“You had out in the Everglades, in front of God and everyone, farmers, hunters, drug addicts, kids – everyone was catching snappers,” Watt said.

FWC Executive Director Eric Sutton said that there are no plans for turtle restrictions or rule changes but that he wanted to give commissioners an idea of what the situation is and what they may be facing in the future.

“There are so many threats to our turtles, including development, that are working in synergy to have a negative impact on the population,” Heinrich said. “Illegal black market sales is one we can do something about.”