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Turtles, other reptiles could be saved from poachers, black market by SC Senate bill

BY NOAH FEIT
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Politicians could come to the rescue of turtles in South Carolina.

A bill was introduced in the South Carolina Senate that would “ban the commercial trade of native reptiles and amphibians in the state,” the Center for Biological Diversity said in a news release.

The Committee on Fish, Game and Forestry is weighing the bipartisan bill introduced by Senators Vincent Sheheen, D-Kershaw, and Chip Campsen, R-Charleston, according to the release.

If passed, the bill “would make it unlawful for a person to sell, purchase, trade, exchange, barter, export, ship, transfer, possess or re-home any native reptile or amphibian species,” the center said.

The only exceptions would be for personal possession of certain species with permission from state wildlife officials.

“This legislation is a lifeline for South Carolina’s rare and beautiful reptiles and amphibians, which are targeted for sale in domestic and international markets,” Center for Biological Diversity attorney Elise Bennett said in the release. “Turtles are especially vulnerable to overcollection, as the demand for them is so high. We’re thrilled South Carolina is poised to join the majority of states across the country that protect their wild turtles.”



The center said there’s urgency for this legislation because hundreds of thousands of turtles classified as “wild caught” are exported from the U.S. annually to be used as food, pets, and for medicinal purposes in Asia. The demand in Asia is great as the native turtle populations have been depleted by “soaring consumption,” according to the release.

“(The bill) will help protect turtles from exploitation in South Carolina but, more importantly, effectively closes a loophole that fosters the illegal collection of protected turtle species in surrounding states,” said Rick Hudson, president of the Turtle Survival Alliance, according to the release. “The southeastern United States, including South Carolina, is the world’s leading turtle diversity hot spot with at least 20 species of turtles and one tortoise calling South Carolina home.”

Current laws do not protect the state’s native turtles, allowing them to be trafficked on the black market, wildlife officials said in the release.

“The state is critically important to the survival of these ancient creatures, but they have increasingly come under threat due to poaching for the global wildlife trade,” Hudson said. “This natural heritage belongs to all South Carolinians, not just those who aim to profit from it for personal gain.”

In 2018, state wildlife officials arrested a kingpin and five others in South Carolina in an international scheme to traffic rare turtles to dealers in New York, Hong Kong and the Carolinas.

In September 2019, state wildlife officials seized more than 200 turtles from a trafficker who was planning to ship them to Asia.

“South Carolina’s turtles are a natural treasure, and it breaks my heart knowing these fragile creatures suffer stress and starvation just to enrich traffickers,” wildlife veterinarian Paul Gibbons said in the release. “Successful confiscations leave our zoological facilities and government agencies overwhelmed by the sheer number needing intensive care to nurse them back to health, with little to no hope of ever returning home.

“Passing this bill would be a great stride in the right direction.”