

Minnesota's turtle harvest could be permanently banned

By Nate Gottlieb

Nearly 20 years after the Legislature moved to phase out commercial turtle harvesting, the practice could be permanently banned in Minnesota, a move that could boost the state's native turtle population.

[HF387](#), sponsored by [Rep. Samantha Vang](#) (DFL-Brooklyn Center), would prevent trappers from catching turtles for commercial purposes, which activists and conservationists say is an especially harmful practice.

The bill was laid over Tuesday by the House Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee for possible inclusion in an omnibus bill. It has no Senate companion.

For years, Minnesota turtlers have sold certain types of turtles as pets and for food and medicinal purposes, catching tens of thousands of animals.

In the early 2000s, the Legislature barred the issuance of new turtle sellers' licenses, a move the Department of Natural Resources thought would eventually end the turtle trade, Assistant Commissioner Bob Meier said.

But the law allowed the approximately 100 existing license-holders to continue trapping in perpetuity, and while there are just 21 licenses still in use, thousands of turtles continue to be taken each year.

"The decline in licenses has not been followed by a decline in the harvest," said Ann Pierce, deputy director of the DNR's Ecological and Water Resources Division.

Advocates say turtle harvesting is particularly problematic for Minnesota's turtle population when compared to threats such as predators and traffic, because it removes sexually mature animals from the environment. Turtles take a decade or more to reach sexual maturity, they say, and given that most don't make it to adulthood, allowing the ones that do make it to survive is vital.

"Even modest collect pressure on snapping turtles can quickly lead to a 50% decline in population," said Collette Adkins, a scientist and attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, noting one of Minnesota's nine native turtle species.

The bill still would allow turtle trapping for recreational and personal uses. It would require recreational turtle licenses in addition to residential angling licenses to take turtles, and it would prohibit the use of traps and commercial equipment to catch them.