



Conservation groups decry Louisiana's lack of regulation of turtle trade

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BATON ROUGE -- Before they become pets in Turkey or ingredients in traditional Chinese medicine, many of the world's commercially-sold turtles hatch in Louisiana.

Recently, conservation groups have challenged the state's Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to extend more protections to native stocks. However, what began as a fight over catching wild turtles has morphed into a larger discussion of the government's ability to track animals shipped out of the state.

More than 16 million wild-caught turtles were exported from Louisiana in the past five years, according to a recent petition by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Gulf Restoration Network.

The groups have protested the depletion of wild populations and urged the state to enforce commercial trapping restrictions. They point out that turtles eat scavenged plant and animal matter, making them a vital part of the ecosystem.

In response, state wildlife officials clarified that "approximately 97 percent of these turtles (marked 'wild-caught' on export forms) are not wild-caught but are hatchlings that were, and are, produced from existing breeding stock on licensed Louisiana Turtle Farms."

A federal fish and wildlife spokeswoman declined comment on the distinction, referring questions back to the state.

Jeff Boundy, Louisiana's herpetologist, said federal wildlife officials haven't returned his calls on the issue of defining what constitutes wild-caught turtles. But, he said, the designation was put in place 12 to 15 years ago when some species of map and alligator snapping turtles were placed on an international watch list.

Conservationists are frustrated regulators don't appear to be keeping track of the animals being shipped out of Louisiana.

"The state's not watching the private industry," said Elise Bennett, reptile and amphibian staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The question now is not whether millions of turtles are being plucked from their natural environment, but whether lax enforcement could allow farmers to catch turtles to bring in as farm breeding stock or whether poachers and smugglers could capture a protected species elsewhere and ship it out of Louisiana under a false export label.

Louisiana has seen turtle smuggling before. In 2014, agents uncovered an illegal ring that could sell individual wood turtles in Asia for up to \$1,700 each.

Turtle consumption in places like Vietnam and southern China has soared in recent years, endangering and possibly extinguishing local populations, according to the petition filed by the conservation groups.

American turtles are a popular commodity because they are similar to those species that have been depleted.

Most of Louisiana's exports go to Asia. However more farms have begun cropping up in China, and local farmers are worried they could cut into their market, Boundy said. As a result, he said, they may be wary of shipping over some specimens, like an adult diamondback terrapin ready for breeding.

While some mature species can fetch big dollars, the herpetologist said, little pet shop specimens might sell for about fifteen cents wholesale.

The uniquely long lives of turtles make their populations difficult to manage. A red-eared slider may not reach sexual maturity until it's five years old, the conservationists' petition states.

Bennett's group has pointed to other states as models for regulating the sale of native species of turtles. Alabama, Mississippi and North Carolina have banned unlimited commercial turtle harvest of native species, and Florida, Texas and Georgia have all placed limits on wild collections.

Louisiana, in contrast, didn't even start collecting data on commercial trapping until last year, they pointed out.

The conservationists called on the state to end the unlimited, permanently-open season on 20 species including painted turtles, chicken turtles, river cooters and others.

In denying the petition, the state remarked that it has extended protection to species as needs arise, specifically the moratorium on harvesting razor-backed musk turtles.

A turtle farmer may catch a wild specimen to introduce as breeding stock, Boundy said, but by and large most of the Louisiana turtle trade involves animals hatched on farms, a population the conservation groups aren't making an issue of.

"Please be assured that (The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries) would consider the removal of millions of turtles each year from our waters to be unsustainable," states the agency's letter.

Generally, the system described by the state is one that relies on supply and demand, and the supply of most turtle species has always outpaced the demand for collectors.

