

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Natural Resource Commission

ITEM

19

DECISION

TOPIC

Petition for Adoption of Rules and Request for Review of Rules on
Commercial Turtle Harvest

On March 11, 2009, The Center for Biological Diversity and affiliate conservation groups petitioned the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and Iowa Department of Public Health to immediately repeal commercial harvest of all freshwater turtles.

On April 9, 2009, this petition was presented as an informational item to the Natural Resources Commission. Twenty-two years of harvest data, the 2008 turtle harvester survey, and information from Minnesota on potential PCB levels and other contaminants in turtles was presented by Fisheries staff. The Center for Biological Diversity gave supporting statements in favor of their petition. Several turtle harvesters presented information asking for denial of the petition.

Staff has reviewed this petition and has these comments:

1. Commercial harvest of turtles in Iowa has been occurring for many years. The Fisheries Bureau has been collecting turtle harvest information since 1987. Turtle harvesters are regulated under Iowa law and are required to be licensed and report monthly their harvest of turtles. By rule, a 7 ½ inch escape hole is required in turtle traps to allow the passage of small turtles and fish. All turtle traps must be tagged with the owner's name and address.
2. In 2006, the harvest of map turtles was eliminated by rule to avoid misidentification with other closely related species or sub-species such as the Oachita map turtle. Iowa law only allows the commercial harvest of common snapping turtles, softshell turtles and painted turtles.
3. The 2005 NatureServe National and Subnational (State) Heritage Status Rank listed western painted turtles as increasing in number and common, widespread and abundant. Snapping turtles were listed as stable but also common, widespread and abundant. Only the softshell turtle was listed as decreasing and some cause for long-term concern. It is illegal to harvest threatened and endangered species in Iowa.
4. There is currently no FDA turtle meat advisory or limits in place. Studies do show that turtles can accumulate much higher levels of chemical in their tissues than fish. Most studies show that these chemicals accumulate in the eggs and fat of turtles and not the meat. Of particular concern are the toxicants mercury and Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs). Older turtles generally have higher amounts of chemicals in their tissues than younger turtles.

5. Surveillance of turtle harvesters by the Law Enforcement Bureau occurs regularly. Cases have been made and inaccurate reporting or non-compliance with reporting is reported by the Fisheries Bureau to conservation officers for follow-up. This year, changes in Iowa law will add turtle license categories so the department can better cross-check harvest numbers of turtles between harvester and buyer.

This year the Fisheries Bureau plans to analyze wild caught turtles for contaminant levels as part of the USEPA/IDNR Regional Ambient Fish Tissue (RAFT) monitoring program currently in place. Funding for a statewide turtle population is also needed. The Statewide Wildlife Grant Program cannot be used since none of the three commercially harvested turtles are species of greatest conservation need in Iowa. We will continue to look for a funding source to accomplish monitoring of turtle populations in Iowa.

The NRC is requested to approve the recommendation to deny the petition to immediately repeal commercial harvest of all freshwater turtles. The Department will continue to evaluate our laws and rules to regulate commercial harvest of turtles in Iowa to ensure we maintain a sustainable, harvestable population throughout Iowa. Management decisions should be based on sound biological information. There is a need to collect solid evidence to show deleterious impacts of humans (if any) on Iowa turtle populations and not base decisions on a petition that contains broad statements with little data from Iowa. The petition from the Center for Biological Diversity raises many questions that need answering before a ban should be considered.

Joe Larscheid, Fisheries Bureau Chief
Conservation and Recreation Division
May 14, 2009