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Missouri Proposes Ban on Commercial Trapping of Wild Turtles
Thousands From State Rivers Have Been Caught, Sold

JEFFERSON CITY, *Mo.* — In response to a [petition](#) filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and Great Rivers Environmental Law Center, the Missouri Department of Conservation yesterday [proposed](#) a ban on commercial collection of the state’s wild freshwater turtles — following a national trend of ending unsustainable turtle harvesting.

Under current law turtle traders can legally collect unlimited numbers of common snapping and softshell turtles to sell domestically or export for Asian food and medicinal markets. Thousands of Missouri’s turtles have been caught and sold over the past 10 years.

“I’m so glad Missouri is poised to do the right thing for its turtles,” said Collette Adkins, a biologist and senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. “The science shows for-profit trapping is putting the state’s turtles at risk. If it’s finalized, this ban would protect the state’s turtles from trappers seeking to make a quick buck.”

Under current regulations in Missouri, holders of a commercial fishing permit may take unlimited numbers of common snappers, spiny softshells and smooth softshells from portions of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers with no closed season. According to the Department, 1,100 river miles are open to commercial turtle collection.

Scientists have repeatedly documented that freshwater turtles cannot sustain any significant level of wild collection without leading to population declines. For example, in a [2014 Missouri study](#) researchers found that no commercial collection could be sustained for softshells and common snappers could withstand only minimum rates of juvenile collection and no adult collection.

“The survival of Missouri’s wildlife is in the hands of Missouri’s Department of Conservation,” said Bruce Morrison, general counsel for Great Rivers Environmental Law Center. “Thankfully the Department appears ready to take this step to protect these animals as a vital part of our State’s ecosystems.”

The public has 30 days to submit comments, which will be compiled and presented for consideration by the Missouri Conservation Commission. The state is expected to publish a final rule in February.

Background

Millions of turtles classified as wild-caught are exported from the United States every year to supply food and medicinal markets in Asia, where native turtle populations have already been depleted by soaring consumption. Because turtles bioaccumulate toxins from prey and burrow in contaminated sediment, turtle meat is often laced with mercury, PCBs and pesticides, posing a health risk. Adult turtles are also taken from the wild to breed hatchlings for the international pet trade.

As part of a [campaign](#) to protect turtles in the United States, the Center for Biological Diversity has been petitioning states that allow unrestricted commercial turtle collection to improve regulations. Of the states that share a border with Missouri, only Arkansas still allows unlimited commercial collection of turtles. Just last week the Center and several Arkansas-based environmental organizations petitioned the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to end commercial collection of the state's wild turtles. Also in September, Nevada created a statewide ban on the destructive commercial collection of all reptiles and New York halted all commercial terrapin turtle harvesting.

Before that, in March, Iowa adopted new regulations setting closed seasons and possession limits for commercial turtle trappers. In 2012 Georgia approved state rules regulating the commercial collection of turtles, and Alabama completely banned commercial collection. And in 2009 Florida responded by banning almost all commercial collection of freshwater turtles from public and private waters.



Common snapping turtle photo by Dakota L. This image is [available](#) for media use.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.5 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places. www.biologicaldiversity.org

Great Rivers Environmental Law Center is a nonprofit public interest environmental law firm in St. Louis that provides free and reduced-fee legal services to those working to protect the environment and public health. www.greatriverslaw.org