



319 No. Fourth St., Ste. 800  
St. Louis, MO 63102  
(314) 231-4181 facsimile (314) 231-4184  
[www.greatriverslaw.org](http://www.greatriverslaw.org)  
Founding President: Lewis C. Green 1924-2003  
President: Kathleen G. Henry  
General Counsel: Bruce A. Morrison  
Staff Attorneys: Henry B. Robertson, Bob Menees

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Contact: Collette Adkins, Center for Biological Diversity, (651) 955-3821,  
[cadkins@biologicaldiversity.org](mailto:cadkins@biologicaldiversity.org)  
Bruce Morrison, Great Rivers Environmental Law Center, (314) 231-4181,  
[bamorrison@greatriverslaw.org](mailto:bamorrison@greatriverslaw.org)

## Missouri Agrees to Consider Ban on Unlimited 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 has [announced](#) that it will consider ending unlimited commercial collection of the state’s wild freshwater turtles. 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.

“This is great news for Missouri’s turtles and for all of us who care about the health of the state’s rivers,” said Collette Adkins, a biologist and senior attorney at the Center. “A small number of for-profit turtle collectors should not be allowed to put the state’s turtles at risk. We’re hopeful that the Missouri Department of Conservation will do the right thing and ban the state’s harmful turtle trade.”

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.



Common snapping turtle photo by Dakota L. Photos are [available](#) for media use.

In its written response to the conservation organizations' petition, the Department's interim director, Tom Draper, stated that the Department "agrees that unlimited commercial collection of common snapping turtles and softshell turtles should be addressed through the rulemaking process." The Department points to "recently developed scientific information" about "increasing harvest pressures." The rulemaking process first requires development of a proposed rule, which would ultimately be submitted to the Missouri Conservation Commission for approval.

"Entrusted with preservation of our state's wildlife, the future of Missouri's turtles is in the hands of the Missouri's Department of Conservation," said Bruce Morrison, general counsel for Great Rivers Environmental Law Center. "We're pleased the Department is taking this step toward restricting commercial turtle collection and urge it to fully and finally protect these animals as an invaluable part of our state ecosystems."

## **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.

Characteristics such as delayed sexual maturity, dependence on high adult survival, and high natural levels of nest mortality predispose turtles to rapid declines from exploitation. 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 under mean demographic rates no harvest could be sustained for softshells, and that common snappers could withstand only minimum rates of juvenile harvest and no adult harvest.

As part of a [campaign](#) to protect turtles in the United States, the Center has been petitioning states that allow unrestricted commercial turtle collection to improve harvest regulations. In 2009 Florida responded by banning almost all commercial collection of freshwater turtles from public and private waters. In 2012 Georgia approved state rules regulating the commercial collection of turtles, and Alabama completely banned commercial collection. And in July Iowa published proposed rules that, if finalized, would impose seasons, daily bag limits and possession limits for common snapping turtles, painted turtles, spiny softshells and smooth softshells.

Also in response to a 2011 Center petition, and with the support of the Missouri Department of Conservation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in May [added](#) four turtles — including common snapping turtles, smooth softshell turtles and spiny softshell turtles that are found in Missouri — to a list called "CITES Appendix III." Trade in Appendix III species requires an export permit and documentation that the animal was caught or acquired in compliance with the law, allowing the United States to monitor trade closely. The animals must also be shipped using methods designed to prevent cruel treatment.

*The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.1 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places. [www.biologicaldiversity.org](http://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](http://www.greatriverslaw.org)*