

A Call to Action to Protect North America's Native Turtles from Illegal Collection

May 23, 2020 - World Turtle Day®

Dear Wildlife Professional,

Our native turtles are under siege from illegal collection. Many North American species, including species of significant conservation concern ranging from bog turtles, box turtles, diamondback terrapins, mud and musk turtles, softshell turtles, spotted turtles, and wood turtles are threatened by illegal collection and trade. These species face an already daunting list of threats, including habitat loss and fragmentation, disease, road mortality, and human-subsidized predators. Given life history traits that include delayed maturity, high juvenile mortality, and slow reproduction, turtles face conservation challenges in the best of times. The additive negative effect of collection from wild populations can be the difference between conservation and extirpation.

Illegal collection is not a new problem, but there is substantial evidence that the threat has increased in the last 3–4 years because of intensifying demand from both domestic and international markets. Recently prosecuted criminal cases involve the collection of thousands of turtles from wild populations, well-organized black-market networks, and the exchange of hundreds of thousands of dollars in illicit trade.

Conservation professionals, biologists, and wildlife law enforcement officials agree that immediate action is needed to prevent the illegal removal of large numbers of turtles from the wild. Specifically, increased communication and coordination is needed across North America to address the complex issues surrounding illicit turtle trade activities. Preliminary discussions, queries, and surveys have prioritized the following as the most important initiatives to prevent future illegal collection and trade: support for law enforcement, public outreach, and strengthening of current regulations.

The wildlife conservation community must take action by committing greater resources and attention to this problem. This crisis demands a comprehensive response, and meaningful progress will only occur with a consistent and coordinated effort. We encourage the following actions to address the issue of illegal collection and trafficking of turtles with the goal of maintaining self-sustaining populations of wild North American turtles:

1. Coordinate state **regulations** to help address current conservation risks to these species.
2. Provide additional resources for wildlife **law enforcement** to prevent illegal collection and trafficking.
3. Enhance **public outreach** that communicates the severity and scale of the crisis and works towards eliminating national and international demand for wild-collected turtles.
4. Increase resources for **emergency housing and care of confiscated turtles** to relieve strain on law enforcement organizations.
5. Implement **science-based planning** to guide temporary and final disposition of confiscated turtles.

Wildlife scientists and conservation professionals witnessing this crisis have an obligation to speak to the devastating toll it has already and will continue to have on turtle populations if left unchecked. We invite all wildlife scientists and conservation professionals to join us in calling on the broader conservation community to take action to reduce the illegal collection and trafficking of our native turtles.

Lead Organizations:

Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT)*

Association of Zoos and Aquariums - aza.org

Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation - parcplace.org

Wildlife Trafficking Alliance - wildlifetraffickingalliance.org

Endorsing Organizations:

Advocates for Snake Preservation - www.snakes.ngo

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies - fishwildlife.org

American Tortoise Rescue - tortoise.com

The Amphibian Foundation - amphibianfoundation.org

Arizona Chapter of The Wildlife Society - aztws.com

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum - desertmuseum.org

Buhlmann Ecological Research and Consulting

Center for Biological Diversity - biologicaldiversity.org

Chelonian Research Foundation - chelonian.org

Countering Wildlife Trafficking Institute - cwtinstitute.org

Defenders of Wildlife - defenders.org

Desert Tortoise Council - deserttortoise.org

Environmental Investigation Agency - eia-global.org

Florida Turtle Conservation Trust - ftct.org

Humane Society of the United States - humanesociety.org

International Fund for Animal Welfare - ifaw.org

Lincoln Park Zoo - lpzoo.org

The Mid-Atlantic Center for Herpetology and Conservation - machac.org

The Nature Conservancy - tnc.org

The Nature Conservancy Tennessee - nature.org/tennessee

Northeast Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation - northeastparc.org

Orianna Society - oriannesociety.org

Phoenix Zoo - phoenixzoo.org

Roger Williams Park Zoo - rwpzoo.org

Tennessee Aquarium - tnaqua.org

Tucson Herpetological Society - tucsonherpsociety.org

Turtle Conservancy - turtleconservancy.org

The TurtleRoom - theturtleroom.org

Turtle Survival Alliance - turtlesurvival.org

Virginia Herpetological Society - virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com

Wildlife Conservation Society - wcs.org

Wildlife Justice Commission - wildlifejustice.org

Zoo Knoxville - zooknoxville.org

*Founded in 2018, the Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT) is a grassroots working group composed of state and federal biologists, wildlife law enforcement personnel, legal professionals, academics, and members from non-governmental organizations. The intent of this group is to advance efforts to better understand, prevent, and eliminate the illegal collection and trade of North America's native turtles - a threat that puts many species at risk.