



A Wildlife Trafficking Crisis Close to Home

Partnering to stop the illegal turtle trade

Wildlife trafficking is not a foreign problem. It's happening across the United States — including on lands our agencies manage — to wildlife that cannot defend themselves. Our native terrestrial and freshwater turtles are being poached at unsustainable rates to supply the black-market pet trade. The soaring demand for turtles at home and abroad could be the downfall of ancient reptiles that outlasted the dinosaurs.

Poaching threatens many taxa, but turtles are especially vulnerable. While poaching game species like white-tailed deer is problematic, poaching turtles has a large-scale and pervasive conservation impact. Turtles are long lived and slow to reproduce. When people take turtles, they take reproductive potential out of wild populations that are already at risk. Of the roughly 57 native turtle species, 32 are listed under CITES Appendices due to varying degrees of concern about exploitation. Many species are listed, or under consideration for listing, as federally endangered, or state endangered, or both. At least 40 percent of the U.S. freshwater turtle and tortoise species are threatened with extinction.



The illegal trade in turtles is an urgent conservation priority. Here's why:

- **It undercuts investments by state and federal natural resource agencies** to conserve imperiled species. Many turtles that are targets of the trade are Species of Greatest Conservation Need.
- **It threatens national security.** State and federal investigators have uncovered international turtle-smuggling rings with ties to organized crime, drug trafficking, and child exploitation. Shutting down these schemes is a matter of public safety and security.
- **It is a public health risk.** As we know from novel coronaviruses such as SARS, swine flu, and other epidemics, humans are vulnerable to zoonotic diseases, which can sometimes be transmitted to us through intermediary animal hosts. We need wildlife markets to be safe, sustainable, and regulated.
- **It undermines the legal trade** and is concealed by it. Investigators have caught individuals who are selling thousands of wild-caught animals advertised as “captive bred,” and have exposed operations that use legally permitted turtle farms to launder wild animals.
- **It is a threat that's hard to see.** It requires different conservation tactics and close coordination among and within agencies that can play a role in stopping it.
- **It makes it harder to ensure common species stay common,** like the eastern box turtle. The eastern box turtle also appears to be a common target of the illegal turtle trade. How will we know when the scales tip toward rare?

A box seized by law enforcement officials contains turtles packaged in plastic clamshells and athletic socks. Photo: USFWS

SCALE & COSTS

Between May 2018 and December 2020, at least 11 turtle trafficking cases were prosecuted in the U.S. involving the confiscation of 11,892 turtles. Many of the seized animals were Species of Greatest Conservation Need, including spotted turtle, diamondback terrapin, wood turtle, bog turtle, and Blanding's turtle. In the three-year period between 2017 and 2020, wildlife inspectors for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service intercepted shipments containing more than 7,000 individual turtles representing 13 native species at a single shipping location.



A rescued wood turtle, a species that is considered a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in every state where it occurs. Photo: USFWS

The magnitude of the problem creates obstacles for addressing it. We must keep turtles from crossing state and national borders to disrupt the trade. Safeguarding vulnerable populations requires increasing vigilance on the ground among law enforcement officials and biologists. Confiscating turtles requires additional capacity to house and care for them throughout the forfeiture process or prosecution – anywhere from 90 days to two years – before their final disposition is determined. The cost of care for an individual turtle – including housing, vet care, disease screening, and genetic screening – amounts to a minimum of \$500 per year, plus start-up equipment costs of \$155 per turtle. While we are working to address long-standing scientific barriers to repatriation, it takes several years for seized turtles to be safely returned to the wild. Some will never go back.

UNITED FRONT

In 2018 biologists, law enforcement professionals, legal experts, and researchers from state and federal agencies, universities, and nongovernmental organizations formed the Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT), a working group within the Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation's Turtle Networking Team (PARC-TNT), to scale up the response to this problem. The CCITT is making progress on numerous fronts:

- Coordinating state regulations to help address current conservation risk to these species
- Providing additional resources for wildlife law enforcement to prevent illegal collection and trafficking
- Enhancing public outreach that communicates the severity and scale of the crisis and works towards eliminating national and international demand for wild-collected turtles
- Increasing resources for emergency housing and care of confiscated turtles to relieve strain on law enforcement organizations
- Implementing science-based planning to guide temporary and final disposition of confiscated turtles

PARTNER TO PROTECT TURTLES

We need your help to address these and other barriers to combatting the illegal trade in turtles. Visit www.parcplace.org/species/collaborative-to-combat-the-illegal-trade-in-turtles/

Or scan the QR code below:

