

Summary of the Illegal Turtle Trade in the United States



Midwest Illegal Turtle Trade Workshop
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
International Affairs



Big Picture:



Turtles are an inherently vulnerable and highly threatened taxa.



There exists tremendous global pressure on reptiles as a commodity. This demand exists for North American native species.


















































North American turtles are experiencing high levels of illegal collection as a result of this demand.



The true scope and scale of the problem is largely unknown.

But we know enough to take action.

General comparison of reproductive potential among big-game species in Ontario


Year	Snapping Turtle	Black Bear	Moose	White-tailed Deer
0				
1				
2				 
3			 	 
4			 	 
5			 	 
6		 	 	 
17	 	  = 25	   = 681	  = 912


Note this chart does not take mortality into consideration.


This chart was developed by the OMNR Black Bear Technical Team in 2005 based on an original idea by George Kolenosky.

Snapping Turtle column was added by the Ontario Multi-Species Turtle Recovery Team in 2008.

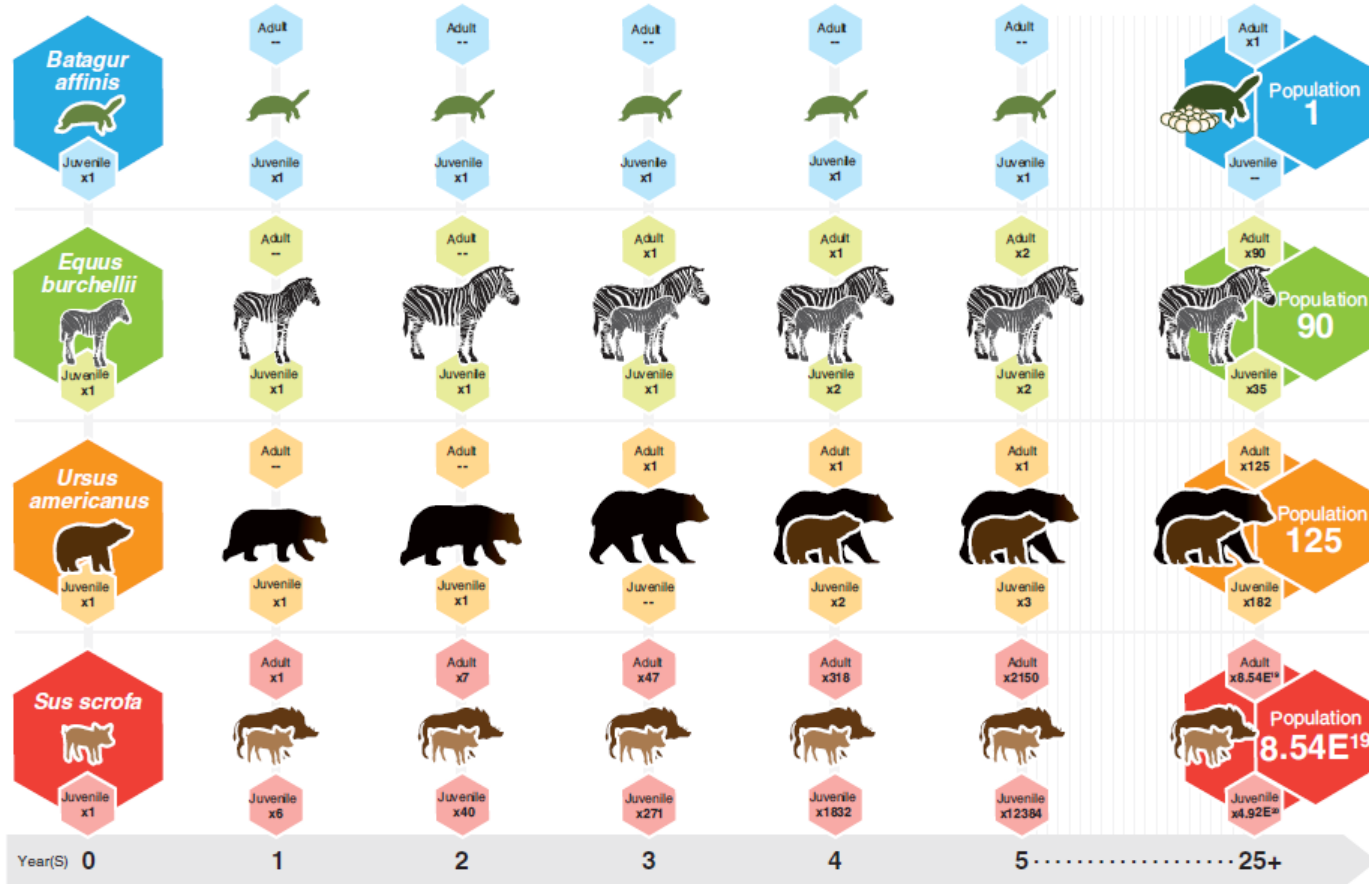
Please note that up to 1400 eggs need to be laid by a snapping turtle before one offspring reaches maturity. This may not occur until year 50.

 = young of the year

 = sexually immature

 = sexually mature





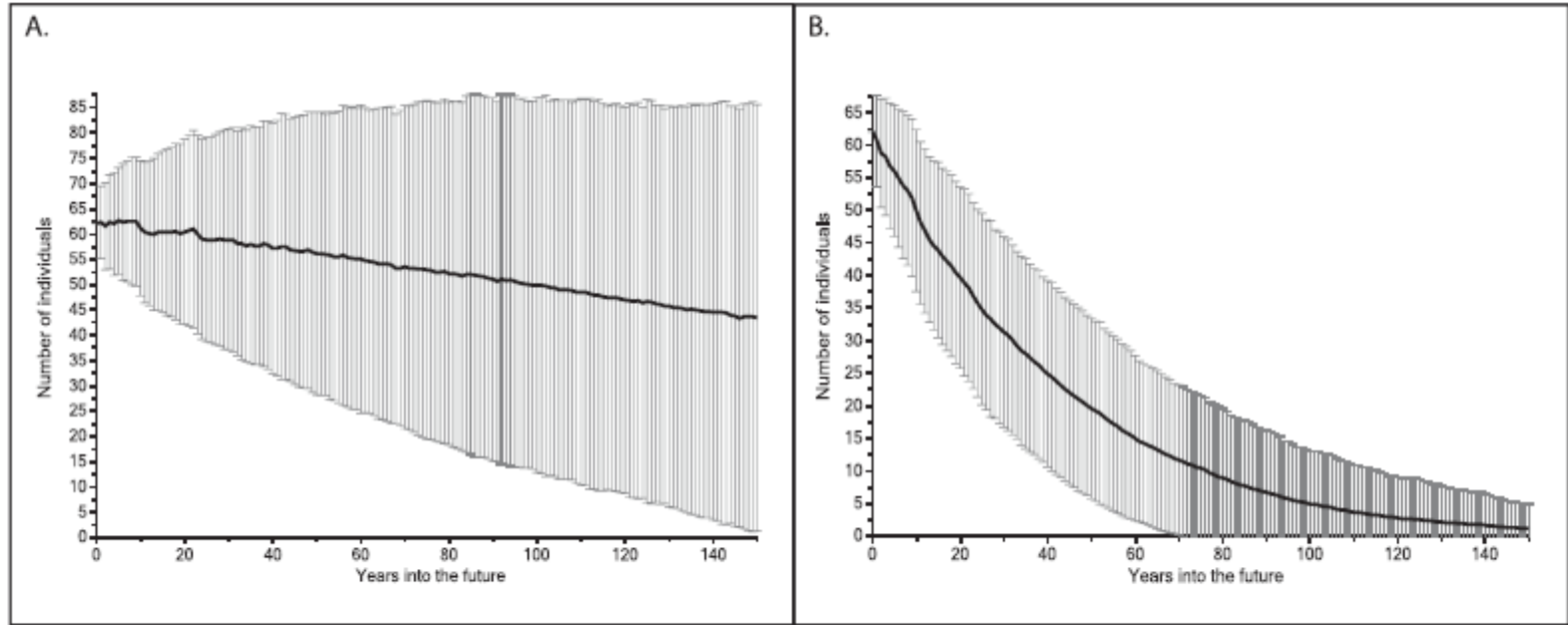


FIG. 1. (A) Baseline Population Viability Analyses of the North Wetland Complex (NWC) in Maryland, USA. The baseline PVA model for the NWC population predicted an r -value -0.004 (95% CI = -0.011 – 0.00298) and a probability of quasi-extinction within 150 yr of 20%. (B) The population viability analysis for the NWC with the impact of road mortality. The PVA predicted an r -value of -0.018 (95% CI = -0.026 – -0.01) and a probability of quasi-extinction within 150 yr of 93%. Error bars are SD from program VORTEX.

Map 1

Trafficking flow map - Reptilia (2007-2018)*

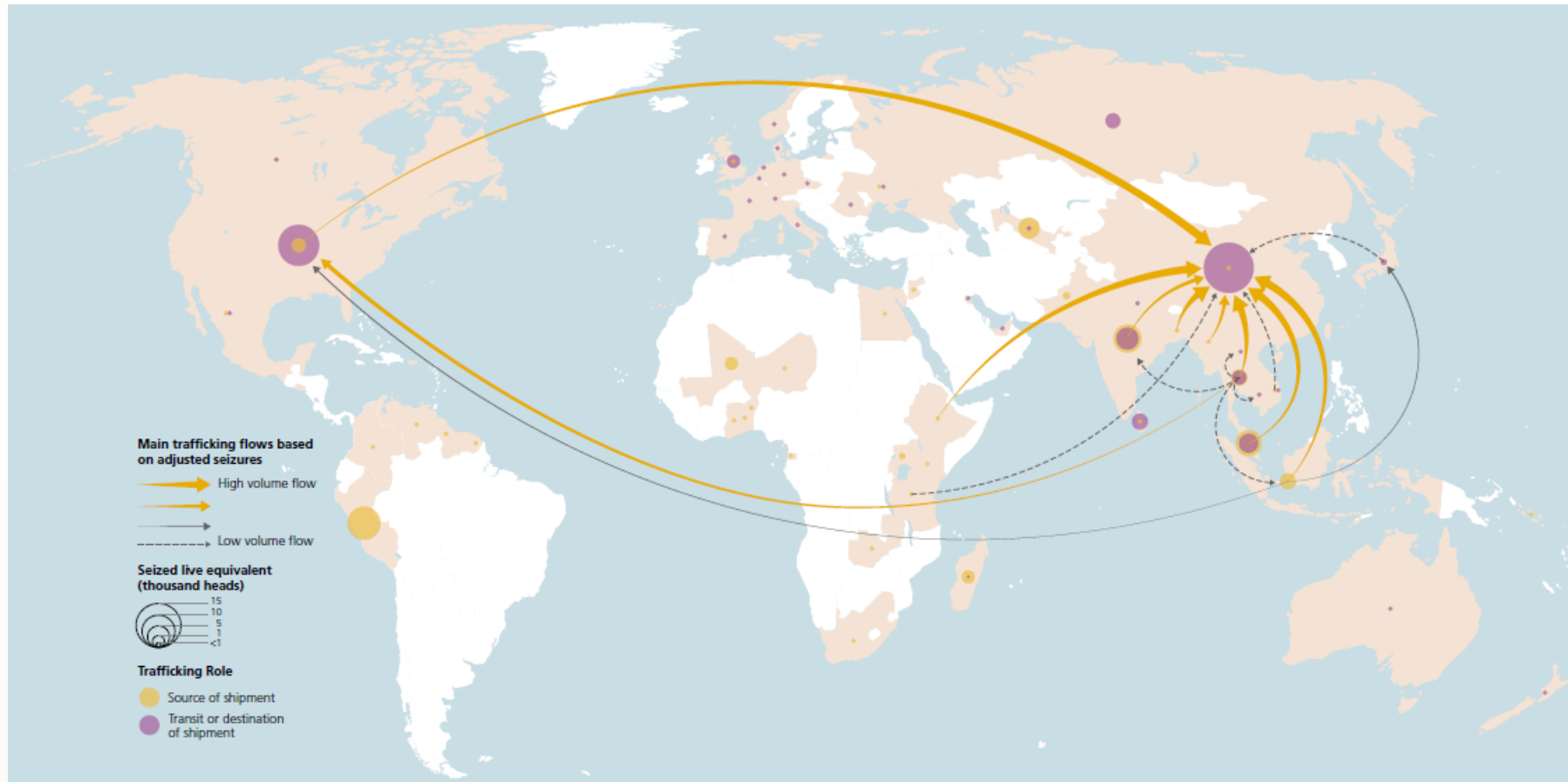
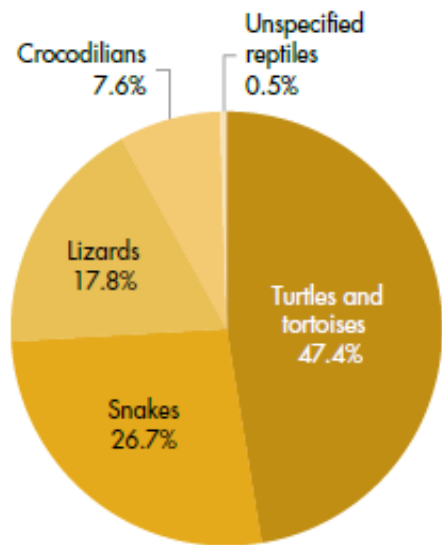


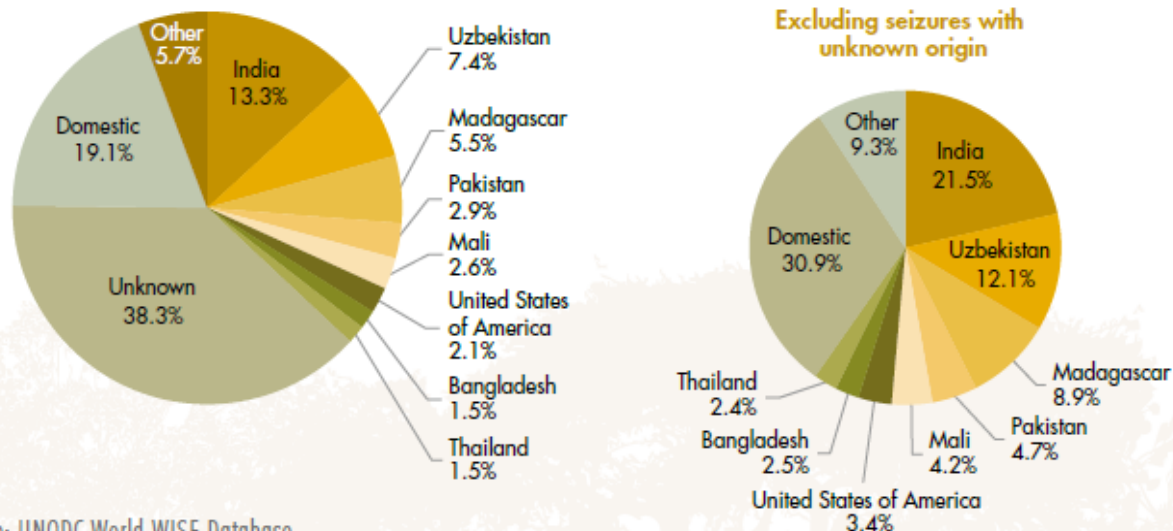
Fig. 1 Share of broad reptile groups in total number of live reptile equivalents seized, 2007-2017*



Source: UNODC World WISE Database

*Includes live specimens and bodies. Based on 6,015 seizure events.

Fig. 3 Share of source countries for the top ten live reptile species seized, * 2007-2017



Source: UNODC World WISE Database

*Excluding food species. Includes bodies.

Hong Kong Online Prices 2013-2016*

Species	Mean Price (USD)
Musk Turtle	\$31
Painted Turtle	\$39
Snapping Turtle	\$662
Spotted Turtle	\$681
Diamondback Terrapin	\$729
Wood Turtle	\$1358

Online Prices United States 2022

Species	Price (USD)
Musk Turtle	\$120
Painted Turtle	\$89
Snapping Turtle	\$149
Spotted Turtle	\$499
Diamondback Terrapin	\$599
Wood Turtle	\$995

Background Photo: Gabrielle DeMeillon

*Sung and Fong 2018. *Assessing consumer trends in illegal activity by monitoring the online wildlife trade.*

2023 Reptile Super Show®



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Table 1. Relative extinction threats for some of the world's rarest turtles and tortoises.

Species	Frequency as m	Weight (% of to	Relative extinction threat
<i>Rafetus swinhoei</i>			30
<i>Astrochelys yniphila</i>			30
<i>Cuora yunnanensis</i>			30
<i>Batagur baska</i>			30
<i>Batagur trivittata</i>			30
<i>Cuora zhoui</i>			30
<i>Cuora mccordi</i>			30
<i>Psammobates galapagensis</i>			30
<i>Cuora aurocapitata</i>			30
<i>Mesoclemmys darwini</i>			30
<i>Cyclanorbis elegans</i>			30
<i>Cuora trifasciata</i>			30
<i>Geochelone platyrrhina</i>			30
<i>Chelodina marmorata</i>			30
<i>Chitra chitra</i>			30
<i>Myuchelys georgiana</i>			30
<i>Mauremys annamensis</i>			30
<i>Dermatemys mawardiensis</i>			30
<i>Erymnochelys maculata</i>			30
<i>Batagur affinis</i>			30
<i>Batagur kachuga</i>			30
<i>Leucocephalon yuccifolium</i>			30
<i>Pseudemys durandi</i>			30
<i>Mesoclemmys hirsuta</i>			30
<i>Sieberrockiella lewisi</i>			30
			2%

Review

Turtles and Tortoises Are in Trouble

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Turtles and tortoises (chelonians) have been integral components of global ecosystems for about 220 million years and have played important roles in human culture for at least 400,000 years. The chelonian shell is a remarkable evolutionary adaptation, facilitating success in terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems. Today, more than half of the 360 living species and 482 total taxa (species and subspecies combined) are threatened with extinction. This places chelonians among the groups with the highest extinction risk of any sizeable vertebrate group. Turtle populations are declining rapidly due to habitat loss, consumption by humans for food and traditional medicines and collection for the international pet trade.

Estimated percentage involvement of threats driving the world's 25 most endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles toward extinction (total for each species = 100%). Estimates based on information provided in TCC (2018) species accounts.



Diamondback Terrapin Somers Case (NJ - 2018)

- Pennsylvania man caught with 3500 diamondback terrapins at his home, all collected from the NJ wild. Mostly hatchlings, but also adult females.
- Best estimates are he collected 11,000 turtles over 5+ years, making in excess of \$500,000.
- He shipped turtles in inhumane conditions via U.S. Mail to paying customers. **Kingsnake.com**
- Pled guilty. Received a 6 month sentence and ordered to pay \$250,000.



INV: 2015505705
DATE: 06/14/2017
DESCRIPTION: Three (3) adult DBTs
from D. Somers
LOCATION: Gallway, NJ-OLE
PHOTOGRAPHER: SA Ryan Bessey

Eastern Box Turtle Case (KY - 2021)

- Kentucky man caught with 246 eastern box turtles in his home, all collected from the wild. Inhumane conditions.
- Investigation revealed that he had already sold 669 turtles in just the previous year.
- Was selling to middlemen in NYC who were selling on to China.
- Pled guilty in November 2021 and sentenced to 15 months in federal prison.



Photo: Joel Sartore



Photo: National Geographic

Box Turtles, Spotted Turtles, Wood Turtles North Carolina (2022)

- At least 722 eastern box turtles, 122 spotted turtles, and 3 wood turtles.
- Illegally collected from North Carolina.
- Trafficked to Asia through middlemen. Defendant received at least \$121k through his sales.
- Individual sentenced to 18 months in prison, 3 years supervised release, and a \$25,000 fine.



Photo: New England Aquarium



Eastern Box Turtles Virginia (2023)

- Virginia man found guilty in April 2023 for illegally collecting primarily eastern box turtles from throughout Virginia.
- At least 27 separate transactions selling them throughout the United States and then onto Hong Kong and China.
- Used Facebook as a means of finding buyers and conducting transactions.
- Individual awaiting sentencing scheduled for this month.



Photo: Tyler DeVos







Mission Statement:

“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.”



What We Know:

To join or learn more:



- Turtles are inherently vulnerable to population declines, even at low levels of additive mortality.
- Certain species are in extraordinarily high demand for the pet trade and other purposes.
- Illegal collection of wild turtles is widespread and occurring at scales that threaten entire populations.
- This is a complex issue that is global in nature.
- Enforcement of existing laws is critical to suppress illegal trade.



What We Don't Know:

To join or learn more:



- The true scope and scale of illegal collection in the United States. How many turtles are being collected?
- An ability to predict trends in market demand among species. How demand changes over time?
- Is there a permanent solution? Market-driven vs. legislative/enforcement? Both?



To join or learn more:



Questions?

