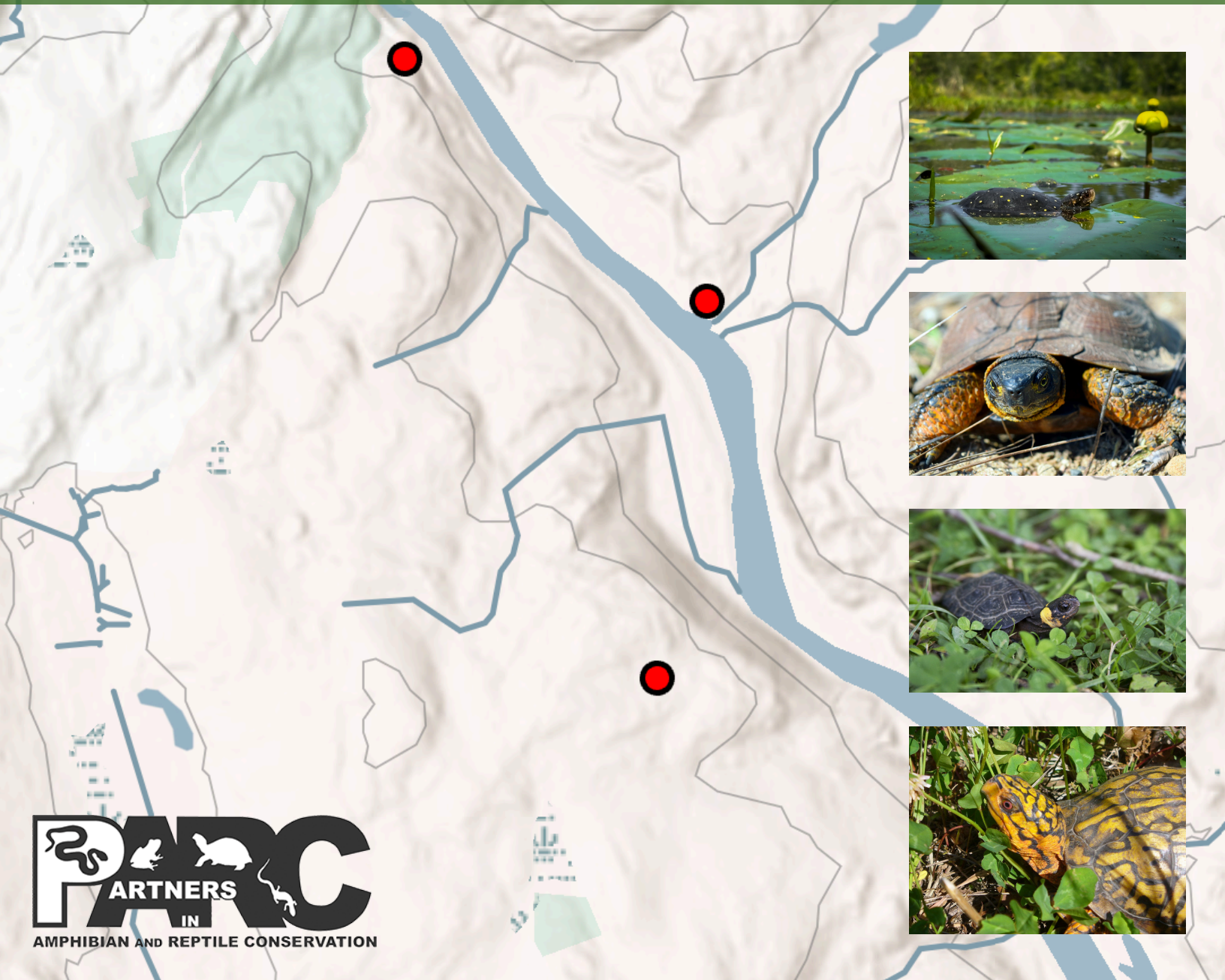




# CCITT

COLLABORATIVE TO COMBAT  
THE ILLEGAL TRADE IN TURTLES

## Guidance on Information Sensitivity and Security for North American Turtles



# Guidance on Information Sensitivity and Security for Turtle Species Potentially Vulnerable to Illegal Collection and Trade



Illegal collection and trade threaten many species of native turtles in North America. Those who share information on turtles – whether in a research publication, public presentation, or on social media – can help counter this threat by:

- Remaining informed about the conservation status of turtle species,
- Understanding what types of information are sensitive, and
- Securely handling information that may make individual turtles, populations, or species more vulnerable to illegal collection and trade

## The Problem

North America supports about 20% of the world's turtle species and harbors two of the 16 global turtle diversity hotspots ([Mittermeier et al. 2015](#)). However, multiple factors, including habitat loss and degradation, road mortality, emerging diseases, and collection by humans, have led to severe population declines in many species. Relative to most other taxonomic groups, turtle populations are more vulnerable to anthropogenic disturbance due to particular life history characteristics, including slow growth rates, delayed sexual maturity, low annual fecundity, and high egg and hatchling mortality in many turtle species (summarized in [Congdon et al. 2022](#)). The compounding effects of centuries of unregulated or under-regulated commercial trade in turtles and recent increases in illegal collection and trade threaten the long-term viability of populations and persistence of many species.

The illegal collection and trade in turtles is a complex and dynamic global problem with environmental and social implications that has, in part, been propelled by the availability of information on the internet, such as location records for individuals or populations and potential prices for species. In North America, those who traffic turtles domestically and internationally misuse available information to carry out their illegal activities, and there is an increasing need for awareness about the sensitivity of information on turtles.

## What information is sensitive?

Sharing certain information about turtles, even with good intentions, can inadvertently assist those engaged in illegal collection and trade or encourage others to participate. For example:

- Posting information about the locations of wild turtle observations on digital platforms, including social media, puts individual turtles and their populations at risk of illegal collection.
- Sharing information on key breeding times, migration times, or population sizes at specific locations can provide people engaged in illegal collection with information needed to find large numbers of turtles more quickly.
- Reporting prices at which turtles are being sold, or the popularity of particular species domestically or internationally, may unintentionally encourage illegal collection or increase demand.

The availability of artificial intelligence (commonly known as AI) exacerbates the issue by increasing the speed at which information can be gathered from online platforms. Considering these risks, the community of enthusiasts, naturalists, land managers, regulators, researchers, and others who care about native North American turtles have an important role to play in protecting information about them.

## Our Guidance on Information Sensitivity and Security

The Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT) encourages all people (e.g., biologists, recreational naturalists, and passive observers) to carefully consider the sensitivity and security of information related to native turtles.

The first step is to remain informed about the conservation status of turtle species in an area, including federal, state, tribal, or provincial listing status of a species. Species classified by an official authority as threatened, endangered, at-risk, species of concern, species of greatest conservation need, or similar descriptors have been designated as such because of threats to populations and increasing risk of population declines. Information related to such species should always be considered sensitive and handled carefully.

In addition, it is important to be aware that demand for particular species of turtles changes rapidly and as at-risk species become rarer in the wild and more difficult to find, illegal collectors may shift their attention to other species, including those that are similar in appearance.

**To reduce risks associated with sharing sensitive information and to help protect vulnerable species, we recommend the following:**

### Protect information on turtle locations and population characteristics

<b>Social media and other public forums</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Carefully consider what information you share on social media or other forums, including descriptions of locations where you have observed or photographed turtles.</li><li>• Remove geotag information prior to posting images of turtles and avoid including any distinct, identifying landscape features, such as mountains, rocky outcrops, river segments, or uniquely shaped trees.</li><li>• Safeguard other information such as population sizes and timing of nesting and migration for turtles at a particular location, which may indicate valuable target locations for illegal collectors.</li></ul>
<b>Community science and naturalist platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When sharing observations on community science or other dedicated naturalist platforms, follow the guidance recommended above and use available tools for obscuring locations, like offsetting or obscuring geographic coordinates, if coordinates for vulnerable species are not automatically offset or obscured by the platform.</li></ul>
<b>Spoken and visual communications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• For spoken and visual communications, including meeting or conference presentations, interviews with the media, podcasts, film, and other communications or outreach, follow the guidance outlined above regarding descriptions of turtle locations and other sensitive information.</li></ul>

<b>Written communications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For written communications, including reports, theses/dissertations, published papers, research posters, and other documents, avoid providing detailed descriptions of locations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ For example, avoid including names of places or landscape-features, study area maps or figures, or other visual products that provide location information.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Avoid unnecessary details when describing sites. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ For example, report that disturbance to habitat resulted from the construction of “a nearby store” rather than “a nearby hardware store.”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Regulatory authority</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When sharing observations on community science or other dedicated naturalist platforms, follow the guidance recommended above and use available tools for obscuring locations, like offsetting or obscuring geographic coordinates, if coordinates for vulnerable species are not automatically offset or obscured by the platform.</li> </ul>
<b>Interactions with colleagues, the public, and others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We all share a responsibility to change the culture around turtle information sharing and security. Help educate and encourage professional colleagues, from other biologists to journal editors, to enact best practices, as described in this document, for the secure handling of sensitive information on turtles.</li> <li>• Recognizing that most people who appreciate the natural world do not want to contribute to its degradation, speak publicly and with family and friends about how to keep information on turtles and their populations safe.</li> </ul>

## Protect information on turtle prices and species popularity

<b>Turtle prices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid sharing information publicly about domestic or international prices or values for particular species of turtles. This recommendation is particularly important for those in law enforcement, or in regulatory or judicial roles, or those who communicate with the media about outcomes of turtle confiscations or convictions of people involved in illegal turtle collection and trade.</li> <li>• Publicizing prices may inadvertently encourage others to illegally collect or engage in trafficking of those species.</li> </ul>
<b>Species popularity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Similarly, sharing information about trends or shifts in popularity or demand of particular turtle species, either domestically or internationally, may encourage people to illegally collect or traffic those species.</li> </ul>

## Summary Statement

The Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT) relies on many partners to advance its mission to reduce the illegal collection and trade of North America’s native turtles. Anyone who studies, communicates about, or is interested in turtle conservation can play an important role by carefully handling information about turtles following the guidance outlined above.

This era of heightened pressure on turtle populations from human-caused disturbance, including illegal collection and trade, coincides with a time when technologies that can aid exploitation are advancing rapidly. That combination makes protecting at-risk species all the more difficult. By following the best practices described here, we can all help to reduce pressure on vulnerable turtle species and contribute to the long-term viability of their populations.

## Acknowledgements

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