



Guidance Document for Creating a State Plan for Confiscated Turtles

Developed by the CCITT Confiscation and Repatriation Working Group

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Purpose: to define roles and make recommendations for the effective, efficient, and legal response to a turtle seizure, confiscation, or surrender. Consideration is given to a diverse group of stakeholders and both native and exotic species. This document also informs the process needed for a state to receive turtles after genetic and disease testing has been conducted.

Goals: 1) provide resource managers with the information and tools necessary to respond to a turtle confiscation event in a manner that provides humane treatment, minimizes the risk of pathogen exchange, and maximizes the potential to extract conservation value from native species (e.g., release back to the wild, use for captive breeding, research, education, or by law enforcement); 2) bring attention to state fish and wildlife agency leadership the decisions, challenges, and needs associated with responding to confiscations, and the need for long term resources to maximize conservation outcomes.

Implementation: Ideally, the state herpetologist would convene a series of meetings or a workshop and include individuals that may serve in the roles and responsibilities defined below. The outcome would be a formal plan developed specifically for that state that would be supported by leadership and implemented. Once developed, the plan should be re-visited on a periodic basis to evaluate any needs or gaps and to address issues that may have come up.

Roles and Responsibilities (see Appendix A):

- Leadership role: state agency lead(s) need to be designated upfront and preferably include leadership from LE and from the wildlife department. Lead individual(s) should be those

that are authorized to commit the necessary funding, services, and equipment to respond to a confiscation.

- Decision-making role: Preferably individual(s) in the state agency that will make the decision on the outcome of the turtles (typically after a case is closed) based on information obtained during the seizure/confiscation and chain of custody period (e.g., disease screening, genetic testing, information on origin from LE interrogation).
- Law Enforcement role: Establishes chain of custody and communicates when turtles are no longer needed for evidence. Are included in any discussions/decisions on communications (press releases, media inquiries) associated with a confiscation. Works to ascertain from suspects the locations of collection, when possible.
- Biologist role: With permission from leadership, works with contracting office to obtain necessary equipment or services. Assists LE in determining identification of individuals, handling to prepare for transport to holding facility(ies), contacting appropriate facilities, assisting with appropriate permits/paperwork so facilities can accept and care for turtles.
- Communication lead: preferably a state agency person that develops a communication strategy with the state agency lead(s) (as defined under “leadership role”) and other appropriate programs (Appendix D-Resources).

As part of the development of a state confiscation plan, there should be a discussion on how to commit dedicated funding if it is currently limited or not available at this time.

Step 1: Turtles obtained by Law Enforcement: seizures, confiscations, surrenders

Law enforcement (LE) has knowledge and resources (printed or electronic information, training) that can help them identify the turtles to species and whether the individual is captive-bred or wild caught (Appendix D-Resources).

LE can photograph turtles and send/email photos to approved individuals (state herpetologist, academic experts, non-profit organizations-initial list of contacts provided in Appendix B) for help with identification, if needed. The biologist should develop a process for how pictures should be taken and recommend that LE take a video to document housing/holding conditions, if possible.

LE is encouraged to reach out to biologists as early in the process as possible to assist with identification and processing, if needed. LE should also make every attempt during the initial seizure to get information on locations of origins for turtles collected from the wild.

This section can be tailored to each state’s chain of custody process.

Specimen is involved in legal issue(s) and legal status stays with the state LE agency (unless a Federal Agency assumes lead).

LE must: *example language*

- Be primary coordinator
- Begin coordination of placement with the lead biologist and be involved throughout
 - Oversee initial actions and consult on subsequent decisions with the lead biologist

- Have input on all phases of placement including consent on final destination or designate this action to the lead biologist
 - Maintain continuity/communication throughout seizure and placement

Chain of custody MUST be maintained throughout the course of the investigation unless stated otherwise by LE. **State LE to provide process, data requirements, and any permit requirements for transport and holding (Appendix B).**

LE coordinates with the lead biologist on immediate care (triage) needed and facilities that can provide holding during the chain of custody process (see below).

Step 2: Turtle health is assessed at the time of confiscation (by state herpetologist, rehabber, or vet), and prepared for transport to a longer-term facility.

See Appendix D-Resources: Time of Confiscation protocols. This document includes:

- Data to be collected to inform the long-term outcome of individuals
- Potential data needed for chain of custody, to be defined by LE (to provide information for Appendix B)
- Species-specific care sheets for those providing immediate, short term care that may not be familiar with the species (see Appendix D-Resources, Time of Confiscation Protocols)
- Information on handling and providing supportive care for injured/sick individuals
- Equipment and supplies needed to temporarily hold animals in a biosecure way
- LE and/or state herpetologists should define what permits and documentation is needed during transport

Step 3: Turtles are housed in dedicated facilities until sufficient evidence is collected or case is closed.

- State veterinarian or state herpetologist may want to develop criteria or a list of considerations for facilities to be qualified to care for turtles (See Appendix D-Resources).
- Identify facilities that meet state criteria (Appendix C). Determine what species they can take, numbers, and ability to provide quarantine care (holding for 90 days with individuals separated and biosecurity measures employed). States can come up with a list of their own facilities. The AZA American Turtle SAFE Program Rapid Response Working Group is also developing a network of facilities that can take confiscated turtles at various stages of holding (quarantine through long term holding). Dave Collins (dcollins@turtlesurvival.org) will serve as the prime coordinator to help place turtles through AZA for the eastern U.S. and midwest states.
- State herpetologist determines costs associated with care/day, veterinary care, genetic and disease testing and works with leadership to acquire funds or contracts.
- State herpetologist provides chain of custody information needs to the facilities.
- State herpetologist works with state vet to develop criteria for when euthanasia is appropriate.
- State herpetologist identify labs and contact information to send genetic and disease screening samples to. This may vary by species (Appendix D-Resources-AZA Health

and Welfare Working Group best practices document, and Illegal Trade Competitive State Wildlife Grant User Guide).

- Communicate requirements regarding necropsy needs and/or collection of evidence for euthanized or deceased turtles.

Step 4: Outcome of Confiscated Turtles for Species Conservation (also see Appendix F-Resources)

Once we know something about the confiscated turtles' origin and health (from the investigation and/or genetic and disease screening), the state herpetologist(s) and decision lead(s) may be able to make a reasonable determination of its use (released back to the wild, used for captive breeding, used by LE, used for research, donated to an educational facility or euthanasia). A separate process for dealing with non-native animals should also be outlined. There will also be scenarios in which states are holding confiscated animals and genetic results assign them to another state or geographic area. A decision tree and key is provided in Appendix D to aid with decision-making and includes some of the following questions:

- Are the adult turtles able to be reintroduced into a wild population?
- Does that wild population benefit from an augmentation? Or would a more likely outcome be a disruption of current population stability? For example-would adding random adult male wood turtles to existing stable populations lead to displacement and/or potentially reduced reproduction of resident turtles.
- Does an appropriate, yet unoccupied site exist where populations can be established/re-established?
- Is the state interested in establishing an isolated population, or providing eventual connectivity to other populations?
- If options for recipient sites are limited, would another nearby state be interested?
- Might it be better to maintain the confiscated adult turtles in captive breeding facilities and use the *offspring* in reintroduction and population augmentation programs??

If the confiscated turtles are to be forever maintained in captive breeding facilities (so offspring can be produced for conservation), then the adult confiscated turtles should be PIT-tagged so that accountability is assured. In other words, LE can be sure that confiscated turtles provided to organizations/individuals are the turtles confiscated and that those turtles do not end up back in trade. Approved/certified facilities are willing to allow some inspection for the purpose of verification.

If confiscated adult turtles are to be used in direct reintroduction programs, animals should also be PIT-tagged (see Appendix D, Resources for protocols) or notched by the state herpetologist or vet and short-term penning programs should be used to increase site fidelity and survival. Data from studies show that short-term penning (i.e., soft-release) clearly benefit gopher tortoise reintroduction programs (McKee et al. 2021) (See Appendix D-Resources).

- 1) Are reintroduction programs thought of as long-term efforts to build/establish viable populations?
- 2) If so, how many adult animals are needed?

The Habitat

- 1) Are the locations selected for reintroduction at a lower risk for poaching (not in a public area or easily accessible area)?
- 2) Is the habitat in need of restoration?
- 3) Is there the ability for post release monitoring (see Appendix D-Resources) to evaluate survival and health of the animals? Ideally, animals would have transmitters and monitored at a minimum for the first year after release.

Begin to develop a list of **release locations** that are suitable for release of confiscated turtles.

What is the decision making process/information needs related to taking back animals that assign to your state? Would this be different or the same process that would occur for a confiscation or seizure that occurred in the state? Would permits be needed to receive the turtle from another state? Would this policy vary by species?

Appendix A. List of roles and contact information. Update annually.

Name	Organization	Address	Phone Number	Email	Role during a confiscation, surrender or seizure
					Leadership(s)
					Decision-making(s)
					Lead Biologist(s)
					Lead biologist back-up
					Lead biologist back-up
					Communications lead(s)

Appendix B. LE Chain of Custody process (state to provide).

Appendix C. List of facilities that meet state criteria. Note: There may be more than one contact per facility, however, there should be a number or contact that can be reached during non-working hours, if possible.

Name	Organization	Address	Phone Number	Email	Turtle Species Accepted	Number of turtles that can be accepted	Do they have capacity to quarantine? Yes/No	Do they have capacity for post-quarantine holding?

Appendix D. Resources

CCITT Communication Guide

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qQjw1GCxliB95QzzHixPEMSIxm2J1XJl/view?usp=drive_link

Example Turtle ID guides

Florida

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Cth7kPsLMb0Xaf8fUJTwc699eOoJGqDY/view?usp=share_link

Minnesota

https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/reptiles_amphibians/turtles/index.html

New Jersey

<https://www.nj.gov/dep/fgw/ensp/pdf/turtles.pdf>

New York

https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/administration_pdf/turtles2.pdf

Ohio

https://ohiodnr.gov/static/documents/wildlife/backyard-wildlife/Pub%205354_Reptiles%20of%20Ohio%20Field%20Guide.pdf

Pennsylvania

<https://www.paherps.com/herps/turtles/>

South Carolina

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rJBulkCXf2r0NDswvuObkHtIzihyahUa/view?usp=share_link

Virginia

https://www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/identification-keys/id-keys-turtles/virginia_turtle_identification_guide.htm

Box turtles

http://www.northeastparc.org/products/pdfs/NEPARC_BoxTurtle_IDGuide.pdf

All Turtles

<https://www.inaturalist.org/guides/2092>

<https://whattheherp.com/identify>

Manual for Differentiation of Captive Bred versus Wild Turtles

https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/prog/captive_breeding/SSFA_Species360_Insp_Manual_Final_red.pdf

■ Differentiation between Wild and Captive Turtles_Species360.pdf

List of contacts who can identify turtles for LE

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-MrhkdtawBsptRAg0zp7C2kfOy9Ev74C/edit?usp=share_link&ouid=107248755351404630676&rtpof=true&sd=true

CCITT Time of Confiscation protocols-

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZTOUSo3G82S-liYLnMQPO8El6USuN-RW/view?usp=share_link

Criteria for holding facilities-example from Southern California Confiscation Network

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EO1vYqd97Avl6wG0N92JpbT8NdfBrWZF/edit?usp=share_link&ouid=107248755351404630676&rtpof=true&sd=true

NEPARC pit tag protocol-

<http://northeastparc.org/turtle-pit-tagging-protocol-for-the-northeastern-u-s/>

Post-release monitoring

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SjXcTh_ieqH5yTYwtDjnCIK_cx2rvplt/view?usp=share_link

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1S8e_J7E2XKAwfuTw1hMWW3gR1uY3FTCg/view?usp=share_link

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q4JiyCF8d7htjZnMRT08cqcg5ivourq2/view?usp=share_link

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LEF1sGLKMifhKVuE_LYub-XUyRKvqDd6/view?usp=share_link

https://drive.google.com/file/d/15xaPOMxNKpZg6J073MPqs2B0ld89T036/view?usp=share_link

CCITT Case studies, Decision tree, and key

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YjwSy_1WGqsUemVzuMOywuquZId9W6V5Y/view?usp=share_link

AZA Turtle SAFE Program Health and Welfare Working Group-Best practices for Biosecurity, Supportive Care and Husbandry, Disease Screening, and Euthanasia

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ikxuuKl4aWwcUBxil3SdtICf3eJGPEnV/view?usp=share_link

