



## ARE TEXAS TURTLES ON THE DECLINE?

**No one knows for sure, but researchers hope to find out soon.**

By Rusty Middleton

When looking at a familiar Texas turtle like the red-eared slider, it is hard to imagine how this critter could wind up as somebody's lunch on the other side of the world. Actually, a lot of lunches, because tens of thousands of native turtles are shipped overseas every year. Mostly they go to Asia as either pets or food.

"There are more people in China who regularly eat turtle than the population of America," says "Bayou Bob" Poppwell, one of the largest buyers of wild-caught turtles in Texas. With 400 trappers in his network, Bob alone has shipped about 300,000 turtles over the past 15 years. And he is just one among several large dealers in Texas and among many in the United States.

So how are our native turtles holding up under such harvest pressure?

"We just aren't sure at present," says Andy Price, chief herpetologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "There is not a lot of baseline data on them." However, there are some academic studies and anecdotal evidence indicating that Texas turtles could be in trouble.

River paddlers such as Adrian Van Dellen, who is conducting a survey of the Neches River for the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, has reported seeing fewer turtles on sections of that river. Jim Koukl, a professor at UT-Tyler doing long-term research on box turtles, reports that adults are dwindling in his study area. And scientists at Texas A&M University who studied the turtle trade recognized growing concern among conservationists that "commercial trade in many species of wild-caught turtles may not be sustainable."

Craig Rudolph, a USDA Forest Service biologist in Nacogdoches, is also worried about possible excessive harvest. “There’s a lot of collecting going on for the market,” he says. “Most turtles rely on living a long time for survival because mortality of eggs and young is high. High rates of harvest mean that strategy won’t work anymore.” Indeed, a study of turtles in North Carolina by the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory found that “removal of even modest numbers of adults and older juveniles had a very deleterious effect on some populations.” The study strongly suggested that long-living chelonians (turtles) cannot tolerate commercial collection.

Texas does not currently impose harvest limits on turtles, except for threatened or endangered species. Some conservationists have called for a moratorium on harvest until more is known about turtle populations. Non-game permit holders are required to report their catch, but it is widely accepted that there is considerable unreported harvesting also going on. Thus, truly accurate harvest data is hard to come by.

Ricky Maxey, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist in Marshall, recently convened a group of biologists, natural resource managers, researchers and others from various organizations and agencies to investigate turtle numbers. “I want to try and get as good a picture of what’s going on as I can,” says Maxey. Officials within the Wildlife Diversity Program at TPWD have been seeking public input, and at the end of the process, they will make recommendations for action.