

Biologists worry over increased turtle harvest

March 26 2009, By MARCO SANTANA , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Surging demand for turtle meat in southeast Asia has prompted a huge jump in turtle harvesting, leading to concerns that populations of the reptiles could suffer permanent damage.

Freshwater [turtle populations](#) have plunged in Asia, where the meat is a delicacy, leading to increased trapping in U.S. ponds and streams, said Fred Janzen, an Iowa State University professor who studies ecology.

In Iowa, harvests have increased from 29,000 pounds in 1987 to 235,000 pounds in 2007. And during that period the number of licensed harvesters more than quadrupled to 175 people.

In Arkansas, an average of 196,460 aquatic [turtles](#) a year were harvested from 2004 to 2006, according to the state Fish and Game Commission.

Texas banned the commercial collection of all wild turtles in 2007. Florida regulators are to consider a ban April 15 at the urging of Gov. Charlie Crist, who said in November that continued commercial harvesting "could result in long term impacts very quickly."

Calling the commercial turtle harvest "unsustainable," the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity earlier this month asked officials in eight Midwestern and southern states to ban the practice.

The Arizona organization worked with 24 other conservation and public health groups to send petitions to the eight states, raising questions about the safety of eating turtle meat and calling attention to the number of

turtles being harvested.

"People in states where there's either no regulation or lax regulations are literally strip mining streams," said Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the center. "We're going to see some pretty catastrophic results in terms of the number of turtles being taken. It's way beyond anything that's sustainable."

The emergency petitions were sent to officials in Arkansas, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina and Tennessee.

Officials with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources have 60 days to respond to the center's petition, whether they choose to pursue a ban or not. Officials must let the center know the agency's intentions and can also ask for clarification of the center's data.

Officials with Iowa's Department of Natural Resources said they're concerned about overharvesting but are uneasy about seeking limits until they have a better handle on the turtle population. They said passage of a measure pending in the Legislature that would require commercial buyers and harvesters to report sales information will help them understand what's happening to reptile numbers.

Martin Konrad, an executive officer in the Department of Natural Resources' fishing bureau, said the bill also would make it harder for harvesters to underreport their yields.

"There is a level of concern within our department on the harvest of turtles," Konrad said. "But we don't have defensible data available to tell us that the turtle populations are declining and they are in need of greater protection than what we provide now."

Janzen said he worries that once turtle populations are depleted, it could

take decades for a recovery to take hold even if harvests were sharply limited.

On the Net:

Center for Biological Diversity: <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org>

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