

Terrapene Times

Newsletter of the Box Turtle Partnership of Texas



Issue No. 1

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No More Commercial Trade!

On May 24, 2007, the Texas Parks & Wildlife Commission voted to ban the commercial trade in most species of turtles, including box turtles.

The Box Turtle Partnership of Texas (BTPT) has been advocating for a long time that Texas ban the commercial trade in box turtles. Many people in Texas and elsewhere in the U.S. have noticed that there don't seem to be as many box turtles as there used to be. Where the research has been done, it often shows that the numbers of box turtles is declining. Because of their life history traits, taking adults out of the wild is particularly harmful to many turtle species. This means that collecting them (particularly in large numbers for commercial trade) can drive their numbers down to levels where they cannot recover.

Biologists with Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) have long been concerned about this. By the first of this year, TPWD staff were discussing a ban on commercial collection of box turtles and diamondback terrapins. In discussions with herpetological societies, the efforts of the BTPT were described as one factor that led to this proposal. By spring, the proposal involved a "white list" of non-game wildlife that could be collected and sold. Any species not on the white list would be off-limits to commercial collection. No turtle species were on

the proposed white list, meaning that they all would be protected from commercial trade.

Turtle traders (who collect and/or sell turtles for the pet trade and Asian food trade) were displeased about this,

and argued that there was no real scientific justification for the ban on commercial trade. (This is like the cigarette manufacturers who said there was no "proof" that smoking caused cancer.)

Fortunately,

there was testimony from biologists and conservationists showing plenty of evidence that turtles are at risk, even if we don't know the exact numbers of turtles in Texas. In the end, the turtle traders won a concession from the TPWD Commissioners: the trade can continue for red-eared sliders, common snapping turtles, and softshell turtles collected on private land.

(See "What the regulation means to those who keep box turtles" and "What is the evidence for limiting collection," next page.)



New regulations will help protect turtles like this three-toed box turtle

What the Regulation Means to Those Who Keep Box Turtles

If you keep three or four box turtles, does the new regulation affect you? The answer is “no.” Individuals can still keep up to 6 box turtles as long as they are not being sold.

What if you have ten box turtles living in your back yard? Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) has said that they plan to “grandfather” existing personal collections, but the details have not yet been publicized. *BTPT recommends that those with personal collections of more than six box turtles contact TPWD to insure that they are included in grandfathering plans.* The person to contact at TPWD is:

Duane Schlitter
Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept.
3000 South IH 35, Suite 100
Austin, TX 78704

What if you have a box turtle and you find another one while out in the field, and you want to take it home? Under the rule, you can do so. Our suggestion is to consider taking a photo and leaving the turtle where it is. It should remain easy to get rescued box turtles - those that have been let go or escaped in places where they cannot survive, or those whose owners no longer want them. Getting a rescued box turtle allows you to have the turtle without taking any more from the wild.

What if your box turtles breed, and you want to sell the babies when they hatch? Under the rule as it stands, you cannot sell box turtles, not even your own backyard captive-bred babies. TPWD has said they would consider a captive breeding permit, but this has not yet been developed. We hope that such a permit is made available soon.

According to an email from Matt Wagner of TPWD, they anticipate the rule to go into effect 10/1/07.

To summarize: the new non-game regulation allows individuals to collect or keep up to six box turtles for personal use but does not allow possession of more than that, and does not allow the sale or barter of box turtles.



What is the Evidence for Limiting Collection?

We don't know precisely the status of box turtles in Texas. How many are there, and are they declining everywhere? We wish we knew. Where they are declining, how much is it due to collecting, as opposed to loss of habitat or being run over on the road? We wish we knew that, too. However, there *is* evidence that justifies ending the commercial trade in box turtles.

First, we know that box turtles take a long time to reach maturity, and then they produce limited numbers of eggs. Many of these are eaten by predators, as are many of the hatchlings. Only a very few make it to adulthood. With that kind of life history, the adults must live a long time to produce enough eggs so that the adults are replaced. Where this life history has been studied (in box turtles or other turtle species), the results tend to show that loss of a relatively small percentage of adults adds up over time so that the population will decline.

Also, there are studies that have documented declines in box turtles in various parts of the U.S. And when box turtles disappear from an area, it has been shown many times that new box turtles only move in to repatriate the area slowly, if ever.

Turtles *can* be hunted to extinction. The Asian turtle trade shows what happens when turtles are harvested in large numbers. Because turtles are prized for food and traditional medicine in parts of Asia, turtles have been overcollected to the point that populations have collapsed and a number of species are facing extinction.

Occasionally someone claims that there are so many turtles in Texas that hunters could never affect their numbers. That is what was said about the now-extinct passenger pigeon, which used to cloud the skies of the United States in huge numbers.

(See “For More Information” on page 4.)

If You Find a Box Turtle ...



Thinking About Getting a Box Turtle?

Here are some things to consider:

- Box turtles are long-lived animals that could outlive you if given good care. Getting a box turtle just to have a fun pet for a few months or a year is not a good decision. What will happen to the turtle then? Will you have someone who will take the turtle then and give it good care?
- Box turtles require some specific kinds of care, and without that care they gradually waste away. They don't show that they're sick right away, and can linger on while pathetically ill. A commitment to care for a box turtle means being committed to providing an area with water, space to dig in, places to get sunlight (a cardboard box or an aquarium definitely won't work), and a suitable temperature range. It means providing a varied diet (lettuce and hamburger is a death sentence). Baby box turtles are delicate and should be attempted only if you have studied their needs carefully.
- You can get a box turtle without harming wild populations of turtles if you contact a breeder or someone who rescues and adopts out turtles that have been found or donated. Remember that the new regulation from Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept. prohibits commercial trade in box turtles, so you should not see box turtles in pet stores.
- There are some good books, websites, and other media that show how to take care of box turtles. If you plan to get a box turtle, please spend some time learning how to take good care of them, and you may have a charming and long-lived companion.

Things You Can Do To Help the Traveling Turtle:

- Try not to hit it with your car! (If you can do so safely)
- If you stop for the turtle, please do so carefully and avoid any accidents. Pull off the road, and then do not walk into oncoming traffic to save the turtle.
- Pick up the turtle and move it off the road in the direction in which it was heading. (If you put it off the road on the wrong side, it may come back out onto the road.)

You should also know that a recently enacted state law makes it illegal to "hunt" wildlife from roads and rights-of-way. Unfortunately, the law targeted those who pick up reptiles, whether for research, a pet, or just a photograph. At this time there is no guarantee that you would not get ticketed for helping a turtle across the road.

- Don't move the turtle down the road to better habitat unless the present location is unsuitable for turtles (such as neighborhoods, shopping malls, or being bulldozed). Turtles try to find their old "neighborhood" and don't do well if moved away from home.
- Don't collect the turtle for a pet. There are other ways to get a turtle. If you take the turtle home, it hurts the population of turtles just as if the turtle had been killed.
- If you find the turtle out in the field or in the woods, admire it, photograph it, enjoy it, linger over it as an experience you may not have so easily in the future, count yourself lucky but please, please do not move it or take it home as a pet!



What is the Box Turtle Partnership of Texas?

The Box Turtle Partnership of Texas (BTPT) is composed of *individuals* (who participate primarily through an email group) and *organizations* who are interested in conservation of wild populations of box turtles. The organizational partners are:

Dallas-Fort Worth Herpetological Society

www.dfwherp.org

Austin Herpetological Society

www.austinherpsociety.org

Austin Reptile Service

www.austinreptileservice.net

Gulf Coast Turtle & Tortoise Society

www.gctts.org

Jesse H. Jones Park & Nature Center

www.hcp4.net/jones/

UTA Amphibian & Reptile Diversity Research Center

www.biology.uta.edu/herpetology

Friends of the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge

www.naturecenterfriends.org

San Angelo Nature Center

www.sanangelotexas.org

Dallas-Fort Worth Turtle & Tortoise Club

www.dfwttc.org

Join the BTPT by Participating in the Email Group at Yahoo Groups

The BTPT maintains an email group that is available free through Yahoo Groups (www.groups.yahoo.com). Members send and receive emails to discuss issues or share information, and the group has a website where files can be downloaded and events can be placed on a calendar.

The group is moderated, meaning that members are screened before being added to the list (helping insure that we do not get unwanted spam messages).

To join, go to www.groups.yahoo.com and do a search for "BTPT." Instructions for applying to join the group can be found at the Yahoo Groups website.

(Please keep in mind that this email group is focused on box turtle conservation, so if you just want to discuss how to keep and breed box turtles, a different box turtle email group would be better for you.)

Visit Us on the Web - www.btpt.org

The Box Turtle Partnership of Texas maintains a website where you can get updated information as well as download files (newsletters, articles, forms to report sightings of box turtles).

The website is maintained by Brian Wallace, who can be contacted at ornata@texasterrapene.com.



Brian Wallace with box turtle

Ornate Box Turtles at Matador WMA

Box turtles and other wildlife need protected habitat in order to maintain healthy population numbers. The Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) has 51 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) that collectively encompass 756,464 acres of land. According to the TPWD website, “WMAs are established to represent habitats and wildlife populations typical of each ecological region of Texas.”

The website says that these areas “were established as sites to perform research on wildlife populations and habitat, conduct education on sound resource management, and to provide public hunting, hiking, camping, bird watching and a host of other outdoor recreational opportunities.”

At the Matador WMA, a little below the Red River at the bottom of the Texas panhandle, biologists are learning more about the ornate box turtle (*Terrapene ornata ornata*). Mike Janis and Chip Ruthven, biologists with TPWD, are working with Richard Kazmaier, a faculty member at West Texas A&M University, to study these turtles. Materials from TPWD describe two purposes of the research. One is to investigate how fire affects box turtle movement and habitat selection. If an area is burned in the winter, does that affect the turtles differently than if a prescribed burn is done in the summer? This will also be compared with movement and habitat selection in unburned areas.



Matador Wildlife Management Area (photo courtesy Chip Ruthven)

Another purpose is to learn about the demography of ornate box turtles in this area of the rolling plains. That is, they hope to learn such things as whether males and females are about equally represented, how much of the population is made up of babies, juveniles, and adults, as well as the likelihood of each size class surviving from year to year. Other studies, for example, tend to show that only a few

baby turtles survive from one year to the next, but as the turtles get bigger, the chances of survival progressively improve.

The research description states that “the primary study site consists of 273 hectares dominated by sand sagebrush—honey mesquite grasslands” and that turtles within this site will be outfitted with radio transmitters. Dr. Kazmaier’s graduate student, Steve Grant, and other researchers will be able to repeatedly find the turtles and track their movements. The Box Turtle Partnership of Texas is considering whether we can provide support in any way. Research such as this is badly needed in Texas. We hope to provide BTPT members with updates as the project moves ahead.

Habitat Protected by Conservation Groups

In addition to the land protected by TPWD, private organizations in Texas protect a great deal of habitat for box turtles and other wildlife. While habitat loss continues to be a significant threat to box turtles, some important areas are being protected. The Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org) has preserves in many parts of Texas, including Clymer Meadow near Greenville (just over 1,000 acres) and the Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary in the Big Thicket region (5,561 acres).

Another group, the Natural Area Preservation Association (www.napa-texas.org), protects a range of habitats, mostly in smaller parcels. However, in high-quality habitat, box turtle home ranges can be small, raising the possibility that even properties as small as 30-50 acres might sustain a small population.

Helping protect habitat is one strategy that we probably all support, and through these organizations we can each help make it happen.

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www.BTPT.org

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For More Information

One way to study the life history and conservation of box turtles is to consult the bibliography compiled by C. Kenneth Dodd, available at:

http://cars.er.usgs.gov/Center_Publications/box_turtle_bib1/box_turtle_bib1.html

A few additional sources of information are found below.

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