



Update: *The Call to Action Letter to Protect North America's Native Turtles from Illegal Collection*

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Conservation professionals agree: U.S. turtles are under siege from illegal collection

Conservationists offers resounding warning about the risks posed to native turtle species due to illegal collection and trafficking

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More than 650 conservation professionals and 37 conservation organizations signed onto the *Call to Action Letter to Protect North America's Turtles from Illegal Collection* circulated last year on World Turtle Day® calling on the broader conservation community to take action against the illegal collection and trafficking of U.S. native turtles.

The letter was issued on May 23, 2020 as a joint effort between the Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC), the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), the Wildlife Trafficking Alliance (WTA), and the Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT) – a grassroots network of biologists and law enforcement professionals working to put a stop to the illegal trade.

The volume of support illustrates the consensus within the conservation community: turtle trafficking has reached a crisis level in the U.S. and action is needed to confront this major conservation threat. The organizing partners are asking for a sustained effort from conservation institutions, professionals, and the public to speak out and take action against the crisis in their states and communities.

A sustained rise in the illegal collection of U.S. native turtles has been reported by law enforcement officials across the nation and reflects growing demand for these animals, at home and abroad, as exotic pets, status symbols, traditional medicine, and as food. No turtle species is safe: the trade threatens many species of elevated conservation concern including the bog turtle, diamondback terrapin, spotted turtle, wood turtle, and box turtles.

“The illegal trade of turtles is having a global impact on many turtle species, undermining years of conservation work to sustain priority species,” said Captain Van Barrow of the Florida Fish and Wildlife

Commission's Division of Law Enforcement. "One of the most important steps for disrupting the illegal turtle trade is increasing awareness. We need people to know smuggling turtles out of the United States is happening. This threatens the future of wild turtle populations, which may not sustain this illegal harvest."

"The turtle diversity in the United States is of global significance, and if left unchecked, the illegal collection of some of these species could be the difference between their conservation and ecological extinction," said Scott Buchanan, herpetologist with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and co-chair of the CCITT. "We have a responsibility as conservation professionals to do everything in our power to stand up and say that collection from wild populations needs to stop."

While it's difficult to know how many turtles we are losing through the illegal trade, recently prosecuted criminal cases involve the collection of thousands of turtles from wild populations, well-organized black-market networks, and the exchange of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The trade in wildlife is directly connected to other illegal trades — like drugs, guns, and human trafficking — that threaten public health, safety, and the environment.

Turtle populations can be susceptible to the loss of even a small number of adults. It takes years, often decades, for turtles to reach reproductive age, if they make it at all. The vast majority succumb to predators before they mature. That means when people take turtles, they put entire populations at risk. Many turtle species are already stressed by habitat loss, climate change, and car strikes when crossing roads, and illegal collection can be enough to drive a population to zero.

In 2018, partners from state and federal agencies, universities, and non-profit organizations founded the CCITT to establish a united front against the illegal collection and trafficking of U.S. turtles. The CCITT has made strides by aligning efforts and information sharing among different agencies, but there is ongoing need for resources to support long-term challenges focused in the U.S.

"It is wonderful to see the U.S. increasing its support to combat wildlife trafficking internationally. However, we simply cannot ignore that native species need major attention as well," said Jennifer Sevin, Professor of Biology at the University of Richmond.

The Call to Action Letter identifies the following priorities that offer opportunities for conservation partners to help combat the trafficking of native turtles:

- Coordinated state regulations that help address current conservation risks
- Resources for wildlife law enforcement to prevent the illegal collection and trade
- Enhanced public outreach that communicates the severity and scale of the crisis
- Resources for the emergency housing and care of turtles confiscated by law enforcement
- Science based planning to guide outcomes for confiscated turtles

The public can help combat the crisis too. Here are four things people can do to help protect native turtles from illegal collection and act as responsible consumers.

1. Report suspicious activity

If you suspect someone is illegally collecting or selling wild turtles, call your state wildlife agency or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) tip line (1-844-FWS-TIPS). The USFWS is authorized to pay rewards for information or assistance that leads to an arrest, a criminal conviction, civil penalty assessment, or forfeiture of seized property.

2. Don't share turtle locations online

It can be exciting to see turtles in the wild, and to share your discovery. But before you take a photo of a turtle in the wild, turn off the geolocation on your phone. If you post a photo of a turtle on social media, don't include information about where you found it. Poachers use location information to target sites.

3. Do your homework before buying a turtle

Familiarize yourself with state and national laws regarding the possession of domestic and wild turtle species where you live. Consider the responsibility that comes with keeping a pet turtle. Because turtles are long lived animals – some live 50 years or more – they will require specialized care for decades. If you are committed to a turtle, don't shop, adopt. There is no way to be 100-percent certain a dealer is operating ethically, and there may be unwanted turtles in local shelters that need homes.

4. Don't release pets

If you are no longer able to care for a pet turtle, don't release it into the wild. It could transmit harmful diseases to wild populations, or outcompete native species. Bring your pet turtle to an animal shelter, or consult your state wildlife agency or a wildlife rehabilitation center for help finding a new home for the animal.

To read the entire Call to Action Letter, visit: <http://bit.ly/turtle-call-to-action>

Suggested Social Media Post:

Facebook: We have a wildlife trafficking crisis close to home: native turtles in the U.S. are under siege from illegal collection. Since last year's World Turtle Day, hundreds of conservation professionals representing dozens of organizations have signed onto a Call to Action to help protect turtles from this threat. Read the full letter here: <http://bit.ly/turtle-call-to-action>

Twitter: Conservation professionals agree: U.S. turtles are under siege from illegal collection. This World Turtle Day, read the Call to Action Letter to Protect North America's Native Turtles from Illegal Collection: <http://bit.ly/turtle-call-to-action>

Hashtags: [#turtles](#) [#turtleconseration](#) [#worldturtleday](#) [#keepturtleswild](#) [#everyturtlecounts](#)

Photos:



Recent Law Enforcement Cases Involving North American Turtles

May 2018
Two Chinese nationals working as flight attendants arrested at Los Angeles International Airport in possession of 31 spotted turtles and 14 box turtles.

August 2018
New York man charged with unpermitted possession of over 300 reptiles, including bog turtles, wood turtles, box turtles, Blanding's turtles, spotted turtles, and snapping turtles.

April 2019
Oklahoma man pleads guilty for collecting and selling three-toed box turtles. Believed to have sold over 1,200 turtles over a two-year period.

August 2019
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission documents more than 4,000 turtles collected from the wild and sold over a 6-month period including box turtles, mud turtles, spotted turtles, diamondback terrapins, and other species.

December 2019
Florida man sentenced for collecting at least 140 wood turtles in West Virginia and transporting them to Florida with the intent to sell.

May 2020
Over 15,000 turtles confiscated at Mexico City International Airport that were being trafficked to China. This enormous shipment included mud turtles, musk turtles, and sliders, all believed to have been collected from the wild.

July 2018
Pennsylvania resident indicted for collecting and trafficking over 3,500 diamondback terrapins collected from New Jersey marshes over several years.

September 2018
Three South Carolina men and one Florida man pled guilty to smuggling turtles to and from Hong Kong. Investigation stemmed from seizure at JFK airport of 46 turtles in 2016. Suspects were caught collecting spotted turtles and eastern box turtles from North Carolina.

August 2019
South Carolina man arrested in possession of 716 eastern box turtles collected from the wild. The man was wanted by federal and state law enforcement for wildlife illegal collection and trafficking.

October 2019
20-year-old Chinese exchange student studying at Penn State sentenced for smuggling box turtles to China.

January 2020
New Jersey man sentenced for trafficking more than 1,000 box turtles from Oklahoma to NJ. This man also involved with South Carolina/Hong Kong smuggling ring.

December 2020
Chinese national extradited to the U.S. for allegedly financing an international turtle smuggling ring that shipped more than 1,500 endangered turtles from the U.S. to China.

Prepared by the Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT)
Dates are approximate time of arrests, charges, indictments, or sentencing.

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Infographic Credit: CCITT. Caption: Examples of recent turtle trafficking cases in North America.



Photo Credit: Florida Wildlife Commission. Caption: Wild Florida box turtles turtles seized by authorities.



Photo Credit: Gabrielle DeMeillon. Caption: An eastern box turtle moves over the forest floor. Box turtles are particularly susceptible to illegal collection.