

April 8, 2021

Peter Strohmeier, Mn.House

Adam Kopel, Mn. House

Dear Gentlemen,

As a past resident of Minnesota for 65 years in Rochester, and now a summer cabin owner south of Wabasha, I would like to speak in favor of stopping the harvest of all turtles in the state. I have done research on turtle species occurring in Minnesota, the U.S and Mexico for over 45 years, published numerous scientific papers, and am a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature /Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group. Almost twenty years ago I testified and presented data in St. Cloud about this same subject when harvest levels were much higher. Since the mid-70's, I have marked over 5,000 turtles of 8 different species in the Weaver Dunes and Mississippi River islands of Minnesota. Turtles are one of the most at-risk vertebrate groups on the planet with 50% Threatened or Endangered worldwide from harvesting, by-catch fishing net mortality, road mortality, and poaching from unscrupulous collectors. The Federally listed Blanding's Turtle that I study near Wabasha has seen a population of 1,000 – 1,100 nesting females drop to less than 300 in two decades, a precipitous decline of 60-70% (myself and TNC volunteers have recently censused the roads for the last 4 years). Snapping and Painted turtles also seem less abundant. I have personally chased six poachers off the roads in the last 2 years. In 2016 at Weaver Dunes, Markos Diderrich of LaCrosse, WI., was caught putting Blanding's (value of \$500 +) in the trunk of his car and later arrested and charged. He faced up to 5 years in Federal Prison, but was sentenced to only 44 days in Jail and fined \$2,000. The Federal Warden that I dealt with in Minnesota (Ron Armstrong – 651-778-8360, Ext. 15) told me that he was tied into a known Group out of SE Asia, which is notorious for dealing with illegal turtle trade throughout the world for pet fanciers or consumption. Diderrich failed to cooperate with authorities. Not to profile, but three of the poachers that I witnessed in Weaver area were Asian. The Feds told me further that Weaver is a well-known area to the illegal turtle trade collectors. This plays into the dark side of non-reported illegal turtle population depletion and affects non-harvested species.

A critical negative to turtle population stability is that most are long-lived and delay maturity from 12–18 years. A Minnesota example of over-harvesting a long-lived turtle population follows: In 1990 -91, the Johnson family harvested 13,000 pounds or about 900 adult Snapping Turtles in Weaver Bottoms, MN.; 10 years later, they trapped 1,000 pounds, and in 2002, harvested less than 300 pounds. With so many mature females removed from the population in over such a short period of time, population recovery and even its survival will take many years to rebound. Some model predictions put survival to adulthood of 100 hatchling turtles at 5-10

% so replacement of the missing female egg producers based on the damage by the Johnson family (900 adults down to 21 turtles in 12 years, a 97 % mortality) may not be enough animals or time for the population to fully recover.

Another impact on the Weaver turtle population is road mortality to nesting females and hatchlings dispersing from nests. Last Fall, the DNR out of Rochester sampled a Highway that separates wetlands from nesting areas. Over 4 weeks, they found 339 Endangered Blanding's hatchlings, of which 98 (29 %) were dead on the road. Endangered Blanding's hatchlings. Adding high hatchling road mortality to the already high natural mortality rates of hatchlings may result in reducing recruitment into the adult population below that needed to maintain a stable population.

Scientific data shows that in almost all cases, harvested turtle populations experience declines that have led to extirpation of some small populations. I realize that there are fewer active trappers left and that no new licenses are to be issued. However, a combination of Poaching for the pet trade, past and present pressures from commercial harvests, by-catch mortality from unattended fishery nets, and road mortality of nesting turtles and their hatchlings puts freshwater turtle populations at risk.

Turtles have been on the Earth for around 200 million years and they deserve protections that can only come from human stewards of the Earth. The Weaver Dunes area of Minnesota is a jewel of biodiversity and home to 8 species of turtles and an abundance of other wildlife.

Sincerely,

Michael Pappas

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