

Summary of Snapping Turtle Workgroup Meeting October 8, 2008

Members in Attendance: Steve Cohey, Jack Cover, John Edwards, Karen Eisenreich, Mike Johnson, Jimmy Kline, Craig Mask, Rick Morin, Joe Rohlfig Sr., Joe Rohlfig Jr., Rich Seigel, Alex Seiss (for Ray Bosmans), Scott Smith, Chris Swarth, Peter Paul van Dijk.

DNR Support Staff in Attendance: Tammy O'Connell, Dianne Samuels

Guests: Pat Cain, Brian Droneberger, Hollis Lowe, Olaf Oftedal, Janet Ong, Teal Richards

Handouts: Agenda, Communications Groundrules, Towson Study, Southern MD Study, 10/8/08 Texas news article, four items for workgroup history (January 2008 Workgroup Recommendations to Fisheries Service, 3/12/08 Memo from G. Hunt, 5/19/08 Memo from Thomas.O'Connell, snapping turtle 2008 regulations), 2008 Changes in Wildlife Regulations.

Welcome & Introductions

Rick Morin welcomed the returning members and new members of the workgroup and introductions were made around the table, support staff and guests. Rick spoke to three additional items to the groundrules: Scott as a former soccer player would be the enforcer if other conversations broke out, cell phones are ok to leave on for family emergencies, and the data cannot be questioned although interpretations can vary.

History of Snapper Workgroup & Harvest Reports

Rick explained the timeline and the process for the meetings. The fishery has to be managed in a way that the populations are sustainable. Rick summarized the workgroup history, from the recommendations of January 2008. Rick addressed the issue of spring 2008 controversy in which a memo announced the transfer of snapping turtle responsibilities to Wildlife and Heritage Service (WHS) in March and the clarification of unit responsibilities in May 2008 after questions from Del. Smiegel. Rick informed the group that the meetings would be run differently this year, as the watermen are the stakeholders and will be asked their objectives. The managers will present options to meet those objectives. The scientific subcommittee met earlier and recommended the protection of 50% of the mature females. This is different from what other states are doing. Other states are not meeting with stakeholders and they are banning the commercial turtle harvests. Peter Paul clarified that big ranches in Texas wish to eliminate turtles which they view as nuisance animals because they interfere with recruitment of ducks. Rick stated that new regulations must be biological meaningful. Rick reported the harvests for 2007 – 46,145 pounds vs 2008 – 76,930, to date. Steve Cohey said his reports have not been sent in (busy secretary); John Edwards explained that he got his report forms late. Rick explained that we want a history of good reports for a long-term data set. Rick introduced Dianne Samuels as the contact person for permits.

2008 Declaration & Reporting Requirements

Dianne Samuels reported that to date we have 47 permits, 21 outstanding applications, and monthly permit cards have been received from 20 commitment cards. Some permit cards come in with wrong information, such as dealer reported as “public”. Dianne instructed to use the actual dealer names. Craig said “public” could indeed be the name if the harvester sold a few to individuals and not dealers. Permit cards can come in until Jan. 15. Those with cards will automatically receive applications for 2009. Dianne brought some applications and the report book to show the group. Steve Cohey asked why do we want the dealer names and stated that there is too much paperwork, especially since he sells to multiple dealers. Steve asked “Why do we even need to know the dealer names?” Rick answered that there is often discrepancy between dealer reports and harvester reports and audits might be needed at some point. We might have to examine harvester and dealer reports at some point. Steve Cohey said that its impossible for reports to match due to practical difficulties in the operation of fishing. Mike Johnson pointed out the difficulty of contacting DNR when people are not available. Rick said they should just do the best they can with reports. Steve asked about reporting duplicate information on the new turtle cards when the information is also reported on monthly fish forms. Rick explained that we get additional information on the new cards, such as the number of turtles and this information could be useful in assembling a long-term database. In response to questions about measuring turtles at Mike Johnson’s, Pat Cain said he was only able to measure females at Michael Johnson’s. The turtles were mixed together as it was late in the season. Steve Cohey indicated that it should be done in May. Mike Johnson, referring to the Nanticoke data, said that it shows a 40% reduction at 10.5” and asked if bumping the size limit up one inch (from 9.5”) would be sufficient. Rick replied that a 40% rate of protection for mature females would be meaningful.

New Regulation Process & Timeline

Tammy O’Connell recapped last year’s work and discussed the differences between timing emergency and permanent regulations. Last year’s emergency reg proposal wasn’t approved until June. It expires in December 2008. Public scoping meetings are required for new regulations. Snapping turtles will be on the list for a public scoping meeting Oct 30. New regulations will be proposed by mid-Nov, published in MD register, with a public hearing & comment period, and adopted or withdrawn, to be effective Feb 23.

A discussion followed about protection of 50% of females. Mike said the ones in nontidal waters are already protected. He asked if we can calculate the % of bay country that is available to the snapping turtle fishery because most of Bay area is not snapper habitat. Rick said a fantastic study would be to examine the origin of the tidal snappers. Rich Seigel pointed out that the question is “what is the best guess for a self-sustaining pop? And 50% is reasonable”. Mike repeated his question about areas that are off-limits. Rich said the freshwater areas could be the source for tidal estuaries as excess members of the population migrate and keep the tidal population going, OR, snappers in tidal waters could be self-sustaining with no migration – its one or the other. Steve Cohey asked what do you think the size limit should be? Scott said that we will get there with Pat’s data and

Karen's data and asked the group to follow the agenda, go through the process and we'll get there.

Nuisance Wildlife Permits and WHS Regulations

Scott spoke about the 2008 Changes in DNR –Wildlife regulations. Six species were transferred from Fisheries to WHS. Effective August 25, 2008, wildlife control operators cannot sell snappers under a wildlife control permit. Craig stated that relocation within 2 miles is a problem. Rich also would prefer that removed turtles be sold and killed. Craig said the written permission could be a problem and Wildlife control operators need blanket authority. Scott said the biggest issue is not creating a loophole for illicit activity.

Pat Cain's 2008 Studies

Rick explained that Pat Cain came to the meetings last year and observed our discussions. Pat sampled two different sites – the Nanticoke (with John Edwards) and the Blackwater. Sexual size distribution index showed larger male influence in Patuxent and Blackwater than Nanticoke. Scott pointed out that the big increase in % females protected occurs at 10.5". Pat pointed out that his literature research indicated that 8" straight carapace length (CL) is size to maturity for females. Females from Nanticoke vs Patuxent are not significantly dif, but males from the 2 pops are significantly different. Rich added that the key is where to put the size limit. A size limit of 9.5" protects 13%, if the Nanticoke is representative. Steve said he felt the Nanticoke is about average. There was close agreement between Nanticoke, Patuxent, Blackwater, and southern MD data, so we accept that snapper females do not show significant size differences among populations. Mike asked if 10.5" would be sufficient to accomplish the scientific objective to protect females. Rich explained that the concern last year was that snappers from the Nanticoke were much smaller. Rich stated that this is a rational basis for management. Joe Rohlfing pointed out that the female snappers would have another 2.5" of life. Rich indicated that 40% is not an unreasonable number and this is the first time anyone doing turtle regs that is based upon data from the turtle itself. That hasn't been done before.

Open Discussion

Mike informed the group about market demand. As of June 15, 2008, the Chinese market wanted no more snappers. Rich asked if the ratio of 3 males per female was typical. Jimmy said it was typical of some times. Some discussion followed about movement, females feeding after laying (SC and JK), gorging themselves & females not trapping after gorging, lead to increasing male ratio. Chris Swarth asked if fishermen or researchers can tell if females are gravid at the time of weighing? A brief discussion followed about how to determine if females were gravid. Karen estimated that eggs averaged about 10 grams each with a range from about 8-13 g. Karen estimated that fecundity typically ranges from 25-40 eggs per mature female.

Craig gave his opinion that this is the best group he's seen DNR work with and that the meetings are much better than you normally see, thanking Rick for his work. Craig

pointed out that we seem to agree on a Size Limits and that we have lots more data here than we have on recreational crab harvest, for example. Jimmy pointed out that there should be an obvious effect going from 13% to 40% protection of females. Steve pointed out that the freshwater populations are totally protected. Rick asked if anyone thought the size limit needs to be higher and that an 11" min. size protects 63%. Steve indicated support for the 10.5" limit but warned that DNR should not add in additional restrictions. Rick indicated that the permanent reg process gives more opportunity for comment.

John indicated that the recreational fishing booklet says you can trap in freshwater ponds with a 2" airspace. (Note: I have looked for this and cannot find it in the 2008 booklet – which I'll bring to the next meeting. On page 5 it states "It is unlawful to use a trap in nontidal waters".

Rick asked the group to consider a closed season to protect nesting females and to discuss the possibility of selling nuisance snappers from ponds. Steve pointed out that Delaware requires a trapping license (fur-bearer trapper license). Scott suggested devoting time to this at the next meeting and putting nuisance wildlife on the agenda. Steve asked if there was even a possibility get it through? Scott replied that said he had no input on nuisance permits, but thinks language could be crafted to make sense ecologically as long as it doesn't open the door as a loophole to abuse. Craig said that there's some support for sale of nuisance snappers and thinks we can generate more support. Mike asked if he could sell terrapins to Rodney, the only person who can legally possess terrapins, when he wants to add to brood stock. Mike has access to legal out-of-state terrapins and Rodney asked Mike to sell him some for brood stock. Craig suggested going to Carl Rocher, MDA, Aquaculture coordinating council, and the issue could be brought before one of the aquaculture groups to address this. Brian Droneberger asked about "redbellied & paints". Scott responded that no commercial harvest of wild caught turtles other than snappers was allowed and that trade is only allowed for captive bred turtles. Red-eared sliders, however, may be kept. Mike informed the group that a Spiny soft-shelled turtle was caught near Aberdeen this year; Scott added that one was found in the Bush R a couple of years ago and could have been pet release. Peter Paul added that Chinese softshells are seen in DC and VA. Steve asked about painted turtles in tidal water. Scott replied that it doesn't matter if they are tidal or non-tidal. Tammy added that this issue was brought before the Tidal Fish Advisory Commission. Craig indicated that WHS has a protective attitude in general. Scott pointed out that until 1993, it was illegal to take any species on the list, but was not enforced. The revised regulations resulted from groups like this one in 1993.

John indicated a preference for some form of limited entry rather than a closed season. RM told group to speak up now rather than complain to an elected representative that the process has not been fair. Mike and Jimmy spoke about a group of watermen trying to restore the oystershell program. Jimmy will to bring material to the next mtg. Jimmy added support for Rick's advice "he's telling you something that's the truth that now's the time to speak up & its too late when its time to public hearing. Now's the time to hash out things like the season – now's the time to get it out."

Summary & Wrap-Up

Support for a minimum size limit was unanimous at 10.5" (CCL). However, this protects 40% of females and not the 50% recommended by the scientific subcommittee. Options, to increase the protection of females to 50% will be discussed at the Oct. 22 meeting.