

Summary of Snapping Turtle Workgroup Meeting 10-23-07

Workgroup members attending:

Rick Morin, DNR Fisheries Service Biologist/Workgroup Facilitator
Ray Bosmans
Jack Cover
Stu Dawson
Bill Edwards
John Edwards
Karen Eisenreich
Michael Johnson
Michael Lathroum
Rodney Lewis
Craig Mask
Scott Smith
Chris Swarth

DNR support staff in attendance:

Richard Bohn
Nancy Butowski
Sarah Widman

Guests:

Brian Droneberger
Alexandra Siess
Rick Simpson

Rick Morin provided a brief description of the purpose of the meeting – to evaluate the current status of the snapping turtle resource; review regulations concerning the take/harvest of snappers; and develop recommendations for revising snapping turtle regulations to present to DNR Fisheries Service. Introductions of members and guests followed. Rick passed out three pages of handouts including tables with life history parameters for snapping turtles, monthly and annual MD harvest reports and regulations of other states. The handouts were discussed including the idea of managing snappers by life history characteristics rather than traditional fisheries data. Reports from dealers show a doubling in pounds reported in 2007 over 2006 and approximately a doubling from 2005 to 2006, but it would be useful to know how many turtles these poundage reports represent. The workgroup then discussed the state of the snapping turtle fishery. Mike Johnson started the discussion by stating that “what has happened in the last couple of years is not sustainable”. Mike and Rodney Lewis described the Chinese demand for hatchlings (mostly) and Rodney said the price has dropped \$3 per hatchling as the market is becoming saturated and as the hatchlings are growing to maturity in China. As the snappers in China become reproductive, Rodney expects demand and price to drop to levels that will not be worth his cost of operations.

Feeding and Growth

A description of snapping turtle feeding habits and sizes attained in different tidal areas followed. Mike Johnson reported that the snappers in higher salinity waters do not attain the sizes of freshwater snappers, but may be more numerous. Bill Edwards stated that south Dorchester was too salty, but Blackwater was OK for snappers. Rodney Lewis stated that snappers of 3.5 to 5 pounds are capable of nesting and that annual growth of 1.25 to 1.5 pounds in captivity was possible after the first year. A discussion followed with Karen Eisenreich about the difficulty of comparing the high growth rates possible in aquaculture with that of wild turtles. Shifts in food items were discussed and Mike said they gorge on choke cherries when ripe and that diets change seasonally and regionally. Both Mike and Rodney said snappers grow more rapidly than is thought.

How sustainability is defined was discussed. Stu or Mike said turtle populations recover in 4 to 5 year cycles and can be fished sustainably every 4 to 5 years. Jack Cover cautioned that it is difficult to separate growth from movement into areas previously fished and that movements may be responsible for apparent population growth/increase in a particular area.

Life History – Nesting

The discussion moved to life history characteristics. Craig Mask reported his observations on the Patuxent River, where “predation is wiping out almost all eggs”. A wide ranging discussion about predators followed. Chris Swarth suggested that people who called about snappers nesting in their gardens could pour a bucket of water over the nest to dilute the scent and possibly reduce predation – something simple a homeowner could do. Mike asked about a turtle hatchery and a discussion followed about head-starting as a last resort for endangered species and also about the Ontario experiments with raising snappers for release which was not cost-effective. Chris pointed out that releasing young turtles does little good if the root cause of the species’ decline is not addressed. Craig followed with a description of creating nesting habitat and that two examples in the Patuxent River could be seen. Bill pointed out that the practice of no-till in the early fall was saving turtle nests and allowing them to hatch naturally. Rodney recounted his experience of finding 1700 babies in the nests when he excavated his ponds in late fall/early winter when he thought emergence from nests was completed. Chris pointed out that snappers in Maryland typically emerge in the fall.

In a discussion about the importance of size and age in turtles, Jack pointed out that turtles utilize a bet-hedging life history strategy and offered that allowing snappers only 1 to 3 or 4 years of reproduction before harvest may not be sufficient. Rodney countered that there are areas not accessible to trappers and these areas may provide sufficient protection for large females to continue the population.

A discussion followed by almost everyone, but especially Craig Mask, about subsidized predators such as raccoons. Craig also pointed out the need for long-term education to correct the common practice and “big problem” of people shooting at turtles.

Nuisance Permits Non-Tidal & Trapping

Craig described moving snappers out of ponds on nuisance permits. Karen described her observations with snapping turtle movements in which a large male went over a dam and some locks and traveled 5 miles and a juvenile moved 2 miles to get to a crawfish pond. Chris pointed out that females also will attempt to return to a previous nest site. Rodney indicated that moving turtles or killing them on nuisance permits was a waste of a resource and watermen could sell them to dealers. Mike added that if watermen satisfied demand by removing nuisance turtles from ponds, they would not be pursuing wild snappers elsewhere.

Enforcement

An item not on the agenda was introduced by workgroup members – enforcement of existing licensing laws and trapping in illegal areas (Craig, Mike, John). A discussion followed about the perception of less active enforcement. Part-timers entered the fishery when prices were high and John felt they are the ones who don't tend their gear daily and drown turtles. Officer Lathroum informed the group that reporting incidents to NRP is important to enforcement. He indicated that there have been more reports about illegal traps in non-tidal waters this year than ever before.

Clarification of Regulations

The clarification of the regulations and laws was discussed by Rodney – especially the issue of non-tidal harvesting when a landowner (or park manager) gives permission to remove turtles. At this point, Rich Bohn and Sarah Widman clarified existing law regarding tidal and non-tidal harvest. The legal distinction is between tidal and non-tidal waters, even if a farm pond is located on private property. Rodney pointed out that some data could come from watermen if allowed to sell snappers from non-tidal waters. Mike indicated that this should be easy to do if allowed under a nuisance permit by a TFL. Craig used the example of the 25 tadpoles as an illustration of how easy it is to be technically in violation of a regulation.

Data Needs

Rodney indicated that another year or two of commercial data would be useful before deciding on regulations. Karen asked if dealers could share some of their data with DNR so we could see the numbers of turtles involved rather than the number of pounds. Mike summarized the dealer/harvester reporting issue by indicating that there had always been an adversarial issue with DNR (Stu, John, Rodney also). However, this is a time to work more cooperatively. Rodney indicated that the Fisheries Service needs to ask better questions, such as numbers of turtles caught. Rodney indicated that he felt more studies should be done before new regulations. Many others were not willing to wait 20 years for studies to be done, and pointed out that it is unlikely that anyone would fund the long-term studies needed. Ray indicated that seeing the number of reporting harvesters and the pounds could be useful. Chris said management should be based on the biology of the animal, its basic life history.

Size Limits

Mike said that he suggested four years ago that a 9” minimum carapace limit would offer protection for nesting females. John indicated that he catches smaller turtles in higher salinity and would oppose any size limits because they would affect his livelihood. Scott Smith indicated that reptiles have to be looked at differently than other commercial species in the Bay because their life history strategy is to have long lifespans and continue to reproduce. Mike and Rodney indicated that new regulations should have a provision for revisiting and possibly re-adjusting limits if merited by the health of the population.

Meeting Conclusions

- Whatever regulations are put in place, they need to be clear without any “gray” areas and are a set of rules that everyone knows and follows.
- Better enforcement

Next Meeting

Monday, **November 26th**, 6-9:00 pm

Discuss harvest from tidal areas

“When the bumblebee flies, the turtle will crawl.” – Mike Johnson, 10-23-07