

SNAPPING TURTLE WORKGROUP MEETING 11-26-07 SUMMARY

Workgroup members attending:

Rick Morin, DNR Fisheries Service Biologist/Workgroup Facilitator
Ray Bosmans
Steve Cohey
Jack Cover
John Edwards
Karen Eisenreich
Michael Johnson
Rodney Lewis
Craig Mask
Rich Seigel
Scott Smith

DNR support staff in attendance:

Richard Bohn
Nancy Butowski

Guests:

Patrick Cain
Brian Droneberger
Judy Freeman
Alex Siess
Peter Paul van Dijk
Marguerite Whilden

Handouts were provided to members and guests consisting of the meeting agenda, life history tables, workgroup guidelines and snapping turtle scientific publications by Justin Congdon. Rich Seigel and Steve Cohey were introduced to the workgroup since both men were unable to attend the first meeting in October. Rick Morin reviewed the meeting groundrules and briefly discussed the summary of the first meeting. The only correction to the summary of the first meeting was the meeting date. The meeting summary started a discussion about non-tidal turtle trapping. Steve Cohey provided his personal experience about confusing and conflicting information from law enforcement personnel. Rodney Lewis asked if we had a copy of the actual law and Rich Bohn went upstairs and brought the books to the table. Section 4-738 states that "The Department may not prohibit the use of turtle pots in areas where nets are prohibited." This was interpreted as meaning that turtle pots could be fished in non-tidal waters. However, this section of the law is under the subheading of "tidal waters" and should not be taken out of context. Rodney said he should be able to trap out of ponds like nuisance trappers and sell the catch. The only way a person could legally trap turtles out of ponds (non-tidal waters) would be to have a nuisance trapper permit. Rick and Craig explained that presently, the only requirement to be on the DNR Wildlife Cooperator Referral List is a brief application with no fee (Craig indicated that this is subject to change).

A discussion about the ecological role of snapping turtles followed and what constitutes a nuisance species. People want snappers removed from their ponds for many reasons. Jack Cover indicated that snappers are not the only predator of waterfowl and questioned how a nuisance was defined, asking if a mockingbird, for example, could be considered a nuisance. Craig explained how he does business, including his charges to visit a property and to remove skunks. Mike Johnson indicated that this issue was discussed at the first meeting and could be solved by watermen becoming wildlife control operators. Rodney indicated that turtles removed from ponds should be allowed to be sold in the market.

Limited Entry Discussion

Rick Morin introduced the concept of limiting the number of turtles caught through a quota and/or limiting the number of participants in the fishery; including grandfathering those already in the fishery based on their catch reports. Some examples of similar resource management strategies requiring special permits include horseshoe crabs, black sea bass, and flounder. Rick explained how the quota works for a species such as the Alaskan Pollock. Rodney indicated that striped bass are also regulated through quotas by gear type and that he has experienced situations where it can be unfair when one gear type or fisherman misuses the system. The workgroup members holding a TFL were opposed to the concept of further limiting entry into a fishery. The need for watermen to have the flexibility to switch species was discussed. There was consensus among TFL holders not to limit a license-holder's ability to harvest a species in the future even though they hadn't harvested the species in the past. Mike Johnson said he no longer reports as a harvester because he is buying, but would like to keep the harvest option open. Rich Seigel indicated that limits on the number of turtles harvested was most likely to have conservation value and that populations may not rebound with all the new pressures on them. The population could be reduced beyond the point of return. Some passionate discussion followed about pollution and development and the connections between all these environmental stressors on living resources in general. Mike Johnson said we all had an obligation to attend meetings of community associations, planning boards, local and state government to fight against continued development. Craig felt that limited entry forced higher fishing pressures on other species. Rodney asked how the number of new terrapin harvesters changed after its limited entry in 2006; Steve added that the Dept created a bonanza situation for harvesters when the terrapin size limit was reduced and a form of limited entry was created. Rodney expressed concern that a limited entry could cause an increase in harvesters all looking to get into the fishery and then the fishery would be lost as in the terrapin situation. Jack Cover quoted Congdon's paper showing that calculations for 10% removal for 15 years reduced the population by half. Jack indicated that turtle life histories are unique among commercial species and there is no comparison with species such as crabs and oysters. Rich Seigel asked if it was realistic that additional people would jump into the fishery. John Edwards said he knew of "a dozen" people who jumped in when prices rose. Craig and Rodney indicated that quotas could be considered in the future if size limits didn't work.

Sport Fishing for Snappers

Rick explained that there were restrictions on gear for harvesting turtles but no limits on numbers or size when caught by sport fishermen. Steve Cohey said a creel limit should apply. Rodney suggested a limit of 2 turtles a day for personal consumption. Ray Bosmans pointed out that sport fishermen and others were cruel to snappers because they are uninformed and unaware of their ecological value. The sport fishing guide could be an opportunity for an educational message about the importance of snapping turtles in the environment. The workgroup was in agreement that a creel limit of 2 snappers per day for personal consumption and no sale would be a recommendation to Fisheries Service for sport fishing.

Size Limits

The group had a wide-ranging discussion about size limits. Steve Cohey indicated a preference for a 9" minimum size limit, but expressed concern that Congdon's papers were not applicable to Maryland's tidal fishery. Rich Seigel cautioned against overgeneralizations based on the Michigan studies, but added that size limits made him "nervous" due to geographic variations in growth rates and he preferred bag limits. Rich said it was very difficult to predict what the demand might be in 5 years and by which country. Others indicated that this is why they feel size limits today would make sense. Mike Johnson said he won't take anything under 8 pounds. Steve Cohey indicated that slower growing turtles would benefit from a higher size limit. Karen reported that there were physiological consequences to life in salt or brackish water for snapping turtles and energy trade-offs resulting in reduced size and fecundity. Rich Seigel asked if size limits meant no bag limits. Mike Johnson, John Edwards and Steve Cohey were opposed to bag limits and questioned whether they were conservation measures because turtles could be left in traps until the next day. They felt that their self-policing in the past has been a form of size limit, since Mike Johnson would not buy a turtle under 8 pounds. John said he was reluctant to give up anything because of restrictions on all fisheries. Rodney indicated that a new size limit would affect watermen for the first year, but larger turtles should result in future years. Mike Johnson said a size limit and 2 or 3 week closed season during nesting would be a good combination for conservation. Following the discussion about seasons, Craig asked about how the size limit would be measured. Scott and Karen indicated that they used carapace centerline length and it would have the greater conservation value. Karen drew a picture to show what was meant by centerline length. Mike reported that Delaware measured along the curvature of the carapace. It was generally agreed that Maryland should consider measuring the same way as neighboring states (note: both DE and VA use curved carapace length – RM). Rich Siegel volunteered to provide data from the Patuxent snappers that he has measured by both centerline and maximum carapace length (and weight) thus providing a ratio to apply. Mike Johnson indicated that the "industry doesn't want a turtle less than 8 pounds" and that the length of an 8 pound turtle would protect a large (maybe 50%) proportion of females. Rich Bohn suggested that we examine how other states measure snappers before the next meeting. He also suggested no allowance for undersized turtles. Steve Cohey agreed with the zero allowance and indicated that the number of turtles caught is not large, so culling would

not be difficult. Rodney said whatever size an 8 pound turtle turns out to be – “that will be the way to go”. Rich Seigel added that enforcement of the size limit will be needed.

Closed Season

Mike Johnson introduced the idea of regional seasons because snappers on the lower eastern shore nest earlier and at a smaller size than the Upper Bay snappers. Mike suggested a Choptank River dividing line on the eastern shore and he and Steve suggested the West/South/Severn on the western shore. Karen questioned why trapping would be allowed before nesting season. Mike Johnson replied that the early snappers were mostly males and were a bonus after the winter. Mike felt that the size limit and a season would “go a long way” to protect females during nesting. Jack Cover expressed concern that the life history characteristics required laying eggs for many years. Craig suggested using the Charles County experience as a test case to study the effectiveness of seasons since they have had a closed spring season of April 15 to May 31 for many years. Steve Cohey said that the average size of females is smaller now than it used to be. Rodney has seen larger turtles, mostly males, in some northern areas. Rodney was concerned about a closed season and “going overboard” to start. He asked if there were any studies done to prove limits and closed seasons accomplished conservation objectives. Mike Johnson reported that there is an explosion in small females on the market soon after nesting and that these would be protected by a size limit. John Edwards would prefer not to lose the entire month of May to trapping. He would prefer the closure to start May 15. Karen indicated that the majority of nesting has finished by June 1 and that the peak, in an average year, is about May 15. Scott Smith said every other state with a closed season to protect females had a month closure at a minimum, and if Maryland went with a 2-week closure, it would be the only 2-week season. Scott preferred May 15 to June 15 closure. Rich Siegel questioned the value of closed seasons in general if trapping is allowed before nesting.

Airspace

Photographs of fyke nets filled with turtles were discussed and it was made clear that this was not a turtle harvester. Every trapper at the meeting set their turtle traps with airspaces. It was not known what affect an airspace requirement would have on turtle harvesters, although some (John, Steve) said it could affect new turtle harvesters and those entering the fishery when prices were high. An airspace requirement could affect new harvesters until they learned how to keep turtles alive in the traps. No consensus was reached about including an airspace requirement regulation.

Guest Comments

Brian Droneberger – liked the size limits but not the closed season.

Peter Paul van Dijk – snappers very unlikely to be listed on appendix 2 or 3 by CITES in next 20 years; CITES trend has been to make it more difficult to list species of dubious need for protection.

Alex Siess – questioned assessment of when a population has been overharvested, concerned about part-timers not part of the self-policing.

Summary of General Agreements

1. Limited entry would not be recommended at this time.
2. A size limit will be recommended, although the exact size and method of measurement are to be determined.
3. A closed season will be recommended, although the length and dates are to be determined.
4. A 2 turtle per day creel limit will be recommended for sport fishermen and all other size and season limits should apply.
5. Commercial sale of nuisance snappers by TFL should be allowed under a Wildlife Cooperator and nuisance permit process and reporting requirement.
6. Enforcement of new regulations will be recommended.

Next Meeting

Another meeting is needed. We anticipate some evening in the third week of December. Please let me know about conflicts with your schedules (btw, the yellow perch meeting has been rescheduled to Dec. 19).