



The Jonah Center for Earth and Art

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TESTIMONY

In Support of H.B No. 5354

An Act Concerning Snapping Turtles and Red Eared Slider Turtles

By The Board of Directors

The Jonah Center for Earth and Art

March 8, 2018

The Jonah Center for Earth and Art is a nonprofit environmental education and advocacy group in Middletown. A key part of our mission is protecting the “Floating Meadows” (also known as “Cromwell Meadows” -- 1000 acre freshwater, tidal wetland between Middletown and Cromwell -- but our concern extends to waterways, wildlife habitat, and biodiversity everywhere. The Floating Meadows is a very important and rare habitat due to its size and the ecological functions it performs in cleaning up water in the Coginchaug River and Mattabeset River before these empty into the Connecticut River.

This is an area of great biodiversity that our organization monitors closely, through our own observations and efforts, collaboration with other organizations, and with the help of the research programs of Wesleyan University that is also studying the area on an ongoing basis. (Our understanding of the threats to snapping turtles has been enriched by information provided by Professor Barry Chernoff, a former president of the Jonah Center.) We look for and remove invasive water chestnut plants each summer, and we work to help the public appreciate this area in order to help protect it.

On several of our outings we have observed snapping turtles caught in traps. At first we thought this must be illegal, but then we learned it is not only legal, but snapping turtles are the only species of wildlife that may be taken commercially, due to a 1971 provision in state law that excludes them from such protection. I urge removal of one sentence from Section 26-78 of the general statutes: “The provisions of this section shall not apply to snapping turtles.” We strongly support amending this statute to include protections for snapping turtles along with other forms of wildlife.

Snapping turtles are unfairly maligned due to their name, but they perform an important function as a ‘top predator’ and by eating dead fish and other materials. The species is

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long-lived, known to exceed 75 years of age in the northern parts of its range. Unfortunately, their reproductive biology makes their sustainability as a species vulnerable to harvesting by humans. It requires 12-19 years for females and males to become sexually mature. When eggs are laid, there is a slow rate of hatching due nest predation and by environmental conditions. For these reasons, snapping turtles reproduce very slowly, so taking large numbers could severely impact our aquatic ecosystems. It should be noted that no studies of snapping turtle population in Connecticut have been performed, but turtle populations in general are known to be in decline. There is no scientific basis for any claim of a “sustainable” taking of snapping turtles in Connecticut.

Top predators and large-bodied, long-lived species, such as the Common Snapping Turtle, require special protection. Such species are diminishing in all habitats in our state and in the world because of overharvesting and destruction of habitats. They are an ancient species, having survived since the extinction of the dinosaurs.

It should be further noted that the Common Snapping Turtle bioaccumulates heavy metals such as mercury. The meat from even smaller adult snapping turtles could pose a health risk for humans. Research of snapping turtles in southeastern Connecticut has shown levels of mercury in snapping turtle muscle tissue in proportion to the mercury level in the lakes.

Maine has already passed a ban on the commercial trapping of Snapping Turtles, and Ontario is considering a ban. Strict limits on the taking of snapping turtles in nearby states is pushing this activity into Connecticut. Snapping Turtles in our state also need to be protected. There is no population data to show that Snapping Turtles can withstand the threat of commercial trapping.

As for red eared slider turtles, this species is important from other parts of the United States and sold in pet stores when they are very small. Soon, the turtles outgrow their tanks and are released into the natural environment where they can bring viruses and bacteria for which the native turtle population has no resistance. Therefore, the commercial trade of red eared sliders poses a threat to native turtles and other aquatic species.

Thank you for your consideration of this message, and of the value of insuring that ancient snapping turtles remain a part of our world.

John C. Hall
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