

# POACHING

## and the Illegal Sale of Reptiles and Amphibians

by Karl Blankenship

Last summer, state and federal agents, armed with a search warrant, went into the house of a Bedford County man to seize contraband. Entering the basement, they found the objects of months of investigation: Scores of turtles, many of which were rare or endangered, and dozens of other reptiles and amphibians, from rattlesnakes to an American alligator.

Some were stored in holding pens built into the walls. Shelves lined with aquariums held more animals. A baby pool was holding a bunch of turtles. Power strips were plugged into power strips in an effort to provide enough outlets for the fans, heating lamps, water pumps and other gear helping to keep the valuable animals alive.

"There was not a square inch of that basement that did not have animals in it," said Andrew Shiels, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's Nongame and Endangered Species Unit leader. "We hit him at maximum capacity, so you got the feeling he was going to be moving some animals soon because he couldn't hold any more."

It is a crime not only to sell endangered species, but to sell any reptiles and amphibians taken from the wild in Pennsylvania, except snapping turtles. The raid, which took place last June 28, resulted in the arrest of John Tokosh. He later pleaded guilty and was fined \$5,000 for violating state wildlife laws and was sentenced to 1 1/2 years probation.



*These confiscated spotted turtles are about to be reintroduced to the wild. It is a crime not only to sell endangered species, but to sell any reptiles and amphibians taken from the wild in Pennsylvania, except snapping turtles.*

photo: Andrew Shiels



It was the largest case involving the illegal possession and sale of reptiles and amphibians in Pennsylvania history, and it was part of a coordinated crackdown that resulted in simultaneous arrests in 12 other states. Still, “we just scratched the surface,” said a Fish and Boat Commission special agent who investigated the case. Across the country, the illegal collection and sale of reptiles and amphibians is booming, said the agent, whose name is not being used to protect his identity. “It’s a multimillion-dollar trade nationwide.”

Even though there is illegal trade in almost all forms of wildlife, the reptile and amphibian market has been, and, by some estimates, still is one of the fastest growing areas of the poaching business. Trade isn’t limited to the United States. Europeans and Asians are willing to pay big dollars even for common species taken from the United States, such as

*Confiscated wood turtles (top photo) about to be reintroduced to the wild. Andrew Shiels (middle photo), leader of the Commission Nongame and Endangered Species Unit, and Chris Urban and Helena Jones (bottom photo), inspect some of the confiscated wood turtles before their reintroduction.*



garter snakes and rattlesnakes. “You have people now who are willing to buy common toads, salamanders, and frogs—anything from that all the way up to endangered species,” said the undercover agent. “You can probably sell just about anything.”

Interest in collecting reptiles and amphibians has soared. In one area of California, the number of snake collectors is said to outnumber the snakes. For some, collecting animals is a status symbol: They’re an endangered species that can be kept in the living room. Other collectors are hobbyists who want complete collections of certain types of species. And some are collecting just to sell to others. “We’ve had low-life people all the way up to college professors and doctors who were involved in illegal activity,” the agent said.

Buyers may not even know they are purchasing something that has been illegally collected. They’re just in the market looking for a low-maintenance pet. “They’re small, they seem to be easy to keep, they’re a yuppie-type pet because families are busy,” Shiels said. “The fact is, a lot of those turtles that are sold in the trade don’t last more than a year, if that, because people don’t know how to take care of them.”

Whatever the motive, buyers have created a market for poachers to go out in search of tax-free income. “A lot of times, the public is an unknowing accomplice in the poaching of wildlife,”

Shiels said. "If they understood and knew where the animals really came from, I think most people would object to keeping pets like these."

When buying from a pet store, he said, people should make sure that any reptiles are listed as "captive bred" and not merely "captive born." The latter designation could mean the animals actually bred in the wild, and then produced young after capture.

Pressure from illegal collectors, whether collecting for themselves or resale, puts wild populations at risk. Many reptiles, such as turtles, have low reproduction rates. It may take them years to reach maturity, and then they produce only a few young a year. With turtles, Shiels said, 75 percent of the nests don't even survive under natural conditions. Removing a few individuals can hurt, even destroy, the population.

Poachers typically take the individuals that are the largest, most colorful and in the best condition. They are the ones that have best adapted to the local conditions and know the best places to make their nests. "When someone is collecting for the market, he is artificially selecting against the fittest animals in the population," Shiels said.

Even when the animals are recovered, they can't always be returned to the wild. Unless biologists know exactly where the animals came from, they can't be put back for fear of introducing a disease to a population, or, through reproduction, introducing genes to a population that may not be suited for local conditions, thereby threatening the future health of a particular colony.

As species become rare, they get the dubious distinction of being listed as a threatened or endangered species. But that only makes them more valuable. The consequences are sometimes twisted. In an extreme case, one collector in Alabama set out to collect illegally all endangered red-bellied turtles in the wild. His plan: Once listed, he would sell the turtles back to the state to repopulate them in the wild.

Taking a bite out of the illegal trade is difficult. Cases can take months, even years, to work. Often, the agent actually has to see someone in the act of removing an endangered species from the wild. That means the agent has to gain the confidence of the suspect.

Poachers know their business and the species they are interested in. Unless the agent has spent hours and hours of preparation in studying the species dealt with—their life histories, habitats, collection tips, market value, etc.—he risks exposure. "Any red flag and you're done," the undercover agent said. "When you start dealing with these people, it's almost like going into the drug business. These people have their own terminology, their own tight network. It's very difficult to get involved with these people."

Once, the agent and a partner were working a case involving someone who had been arrested before. The man said he would make a deal, but looked them in the eye and added: "If this is a sting operation, I'll go to jail. But I'll kill you when I get out."



*WCO Tom Nunamacher holds a confiscated bog turtle, an endangered species in Pennsylvania.*

"That," the agent said, "is what you're dealing with."

For themselves, investigators must develop everything from fake identities to fake phone numbers and addresses. But poachers take precautions, too. Photos, names, and addresses of undercover agents have been known to show up on the Internet.

Law enforcement efforts are also hindered because state laws regulating reptile and amphibian collection and sale vary widely. It may be illegal to take a wood turtle from the wild and sell it in Pennsylvania, but if transported to Ohio, where there are no wood turtle regulations, no one can tell for sure where it came from. Such cross-state moves are common among people who participate in illegal sales.

"It's almost like a laundering exercise," said William Anderson, a special agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stationed in Harrisburg. Sometimes, he said, agents find people claiming so many species came from certain states that "the

population in those states couldn't supply the numbers we were seeing."

Minnesota recently considered taking the Blandings turtle off its threatened and endangered list, but decided not to after neighboring states, which still had the turtle listed, feared Minnesota would become the "excuse state." In short, they expected that everyone with an illegal Blandings turtle would say it came from Minnesota. The same is true for other species in other states.

Part of the solution is just raising awareness among the public that buying and selling certain reptiles and amphibians is illegal. That can dampen demand, as well as open the eyes of more people to suspicious activity. The Tokosh case started, in part, when someone tipped off the Commission to a suspicious classified ad in a newspaper. At about the same time, investigators from Indiana contacted the Commission, reporting that a case they were involved with seemed to have links to Pennsylvania. That was the beginning of a lengthy 18-month investigation in Pennsylvania.

All that work resulted in a fine of only \$5,000. But in this case, it's not the end of the story. The arrest was only one in a multistate action that netted more than a dozen people, and more leads. "There are other people out there who we're aware of," Shiels said. After the states settle their cases, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to bring charges, perhaps involving even more people, for violations of federal laws, including the federal Endangered Species Act. That could ultimately result in far more severe penalties and sentences for all involved.

But the biggest losers in wildlife poaching, said Shiels, are the public. "There is a natural heritage in Pennsylvania, and as a citizen of this state, you deserve to have the possibility of seeing or experiencing those animals as they are supposed to be," Shiels said. "These people are trying to steal this heritage from you."