

SUMMARY OF SNAPPING TURTLE WORKGROUP MEETING 12-18-07

Workgroup members attending:

Rick Morin, DNR Fisheries Service Biologist/Workgroup Facilitator
Ray Bosmans
Steve Cohey
Jack Cover
Bill Edwards
John Edwards
Karen Eisenreich
Michael Johnson
Delbert "Jimmy" Kline
Michael Lathroum
Rodney Lewis
Craig Mask
Rich Seigel
Scott Smith
Chris Swarth

DNR Support Staff in attendance:

Richard Bohn
Tamara O'Connell

Guests:

Patrick Cain
S. Alex Siess
Katrina Smith
Peter Paul van Dijk

This meeting was held in the Judicial Conference Room in the basement of Tawes A-wing from 6 to 9 pm on Dec. 18, 2007.

Size Limit Discussion

Copies of three data sets on snapping turtle lengths and weights were provided to members and guests. Karen provided one set of data from southern Maryland ponds and Rich S provided data from the Patuxent population. The third data set was from Harley Speir & Butch Webb's 2006 visit to Mike Johnson. The relationship between length and mass were in close agreement for all studies. Some (Mike J, Steve) said they thought the weights looked too light for the lengths. A mean mass of 7.8 lbs corresponded to a centerline carapace length of 9-10" (Karen's dataset) that would correspond to a curved carapace length (CCL) of 10-11". The harvesters felt that this seemed too light for the length. Rich S. pointed out the agreement with the Patuxent population. Rich S indicated the lack of differing data from tidal waters, the possibility that tidal snappers may differ, and the need for data on tidal snappers. Mike Johnson suggested going with VA's 9" curved carapace limit until the group could examine more data from tidal waters. Mike demonstrated how the curved carapace measurement could be made on the shell brought to the meeting by Scott. Rick M explained the importance of a size limit as a meaningful

conservation measure to protect females. Rich S. showed that a 9" centerline length (CL) would protect 25% of females (this corresponds to 10" CCL). John E. asked what % of the population do we want to protect. Rich S responded that 33 to 50% of females would be reasonable, but cautioned that it is unknown what is needed to sustain populations. Rich S indicated that the size to first nesting needs to be known; Rodney responded that a 3.5 pound female can lay eggs. Mike and Rodney indicated that data collection should be part of an ongoing process. Steve C suggested sending biologists to Mike J's to measure turtles. Rich S indicated that we don't need long-term studies to measure length and mass, but adequate sample sizes for statistical validity. Craig M suggested that the group could make future changes based on the data and also indicated that we should consider the possibility of unintended consequences of regulations, such as switching to other fisheries. Tammy explained the regulatory process and in response to Rich S, how data collection could not be included in the language of the regulations. If new data will support changing the size limit in the future, new regulation could address that. Tammy estimated 94 to 97 days from proposal to adoption of regulation and new regulations could be submitted in mid-February, 2008. Mike J asked if 9.5" would be an acceptable compromise for the first year. Tammy explained that how the measurement is to be taken could be written into regulation. Mike L expressed concern about a measuring device that would be verifiable and stand up in court. He will be looking into what officers in other states use to measure turtles. Scott questioned how many females would be protected by the 9.5" limit. Rich S indicated that it would be less than 25% and that he could not support that unless it was a start for the first year, with examination of the length-weight data of tidal turtles. A discussion followed about isolation of turtles at a dealer by state. Rich S indicated that getting data from Mike's turtles would also be an opportunity to get information on minimum size to maturation. A discussion followed about possession of turtles from states with smaller size limits and Jimmy K indicated that he harvests all along the mid-Atlantic states from SC to CN and keeps the turtles in a walk-in cooler until he brings them to a dealer. Mike J gets turtles from as far as Iowa. Rodney alluded to an ("almost America's most wanted") adventure with 1400 turtles from Texas in Iowa. Tammy indicated that the key word is "possession". Sellers would only be able to bring turtles in from other states that are legal to possess in MD. (buyers who refuse turtles under 8 lbs may be unaffected by this if the tidal length-weight relationship is similar to that observed for freshwater). The watermen indicated willingness to work with biologists to come out on their boats in the spring and measure turtles. Jimmy K indicated that the work would be done around high tides. Craig M said the group should indicate a strong recommendation to Fisheries to devote manpower to collect data in the spring of 2008. There was consensus that this would be a recommendation.

Tidal vs NonTidal, Nuisance Discussion

Rick M indicated that the law of 4-738 applied to tidewater and not to freshwater. Tammy added that 4-619 prohibits gear in nontidal waters. Craig elaborated on the process of trapping in ponds as a wildlife control operator under a nuisance permit. Rodney added that any waterman interested should get on the wildlife control operator's list in Wildlife Div. The sale of these turtles is something that Rich S suggested we should revisit in 2008. Rich B asked Scott if Wildlife could provide reports on trapped snappers. Chris S expressed concern about totally eliminating snappers from ponds that could support a lower number.

The group agreed that the issue of selling nuisance snappers should be studied and discussed in future meetings.

Closed Season Discussion

In the November meeting, a discussion about closing the nesting season concluded that May 15-31 closure to protect nesting females would make the most sense. At the December meeting, Rich S indicated that a broad closure would be more likely to protect nesting females statewide, once the data are collected. Craig suggested that a biologist measuring turtles at Mike's could also examine females for eggs. Karen warned that acting upon a single year of data would be unwise. Chris S preferred to collect data on when the turtles actually nest, rather than when they are found to contain eggs. Rich S suggested that nesting could be inferred upon following the % gravid at the point of collection or sale. Craig M recommended that the group again strongly recommend the collection of additional data. Rick M warned that the state and DNR budget may make additional unfunded studies difficult to accommodate. Rodney indicated that he has some data on turtles he has used in aquaculture. Rich S added that "the benefit of collecting data outweighs a closed season at this time". With that statement, the group agreed to recommend no closed season for 2008, and request a strong effort to collect data.

Limited Entry

There was no support for limited entry at this time and it was discussed and considered to be an option of last resort. Some form of limited entry discussion can be revisited in the future.

Sport Fishing

There was general agreement that a creel and possession limit of 2 should apply to sport fishermen where the license allows them to catch snappers (Rich B & Rich S). The same 9.5" size limit should apply.

Pets

A possession limit of 2 pets collected from the wild should be recommended (Ray B). Existing pets could be grandfathered (Tammy) and registered with the state if in excess of the possession limit. Scott indicated that many people kept snappers (and terrapins) as pets.

Other Business

Rich S indicated that redear sliders were becoming a problem in the state. Craig suggested that the final report making recommendations to Fisheries should include the positions and affiliations of the workgroup members. Workgroup members are encouraged to send Rick an email or phone call indicating how they wish to be listed (names as they wish them to appear, position or title, affiliation or employer, etc).