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Virginia study to determine if snapping turtles are in decline



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Rex Springston

In water to his waist and mud to his calves, Ben Colteaux pulled up a net and found a stinky monster.

Colteaux had caught a snapping turtle, Virginia's largest freshwater turtle — and a living link to the age of dinosaurs.

This one looked the part, with a sharp beak, powerful, stubby legs, long claws and a Stegosaurus-like tail. It hissed and lunged at Colteaux, a wildlife ecologist.

The thing looked huge — 14 pounds, with a shell the size of a skillet. But snappers can top 25 pounds, and a 51-pounder holds the Virginia record.

Some people eat turtles, especially in China, and the snapper is the only turtle for which Virginia allows commercial trapping. Virginia's annual catch tripled in recent years, raising concerns that snappers could be in trouble.

"We have a mentality that there are plenty of snapping turtles out there," said J.D. Kleopfer, a reptile expert with Virginia's game department. "Well, they used to say that about the passenger

pigeon, the buffalo and other species that have either gone extinct or have pretty much been decimated. So we want to get a better grasp on this."

Colteaux, Kleopfer and others began checking turtle traps last month for a three-year, \$100,000 study to determine how the snapper population is doing. On this day in early August, they were working swampy Morris Creek in Charles City County.

Many Virginians have long regarded snappers with fear and superstition, making up myths about them. (No, they won't bite swimmers' toes or snap a broom handle in half.)

Colteaux said snappers are beneficial denizens of streams and ponds, where they eat, among other things, dead fish and detritus.

"I love them," Colteaux said after hauling the grinning, just-caught snapper onto his boat. "I'm a reptile guy in general, but this is a beautiful animal right here."

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Concerned about their own snapper populations, states including North Carolina and Maryland have imposed catch restrictions in recent years. But the snapper trade is little-regulated in Virginia, and the catch jumped from 33,800 pounds in 2008 to 98,900 in 2010.

By trapping snappers, marking them and catching them again — or not catching them — the Virginia scientists plan to determine statistically if the population is going up, down or holding steady. Colteaux, a Virginia Commonwealth University doctoral student, leads the study.

Each trap is 7 feet long, consisting of nylon netting around three steel hoops. Turtles crawl in through a funnel and can't find their way out. Floats ensure that trapped turtles can get air.

The study's results could lead to new limits on Virginia's snapper harvest. "The goal," Colteaux said, "is to find that balancing point where the animal can persist and thrive and people can still continue to fish them."

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China is importing huge numbers of wild-caught snappers and other turtles, experts say.

"At the same time that they have kind of cleaned out their own turtles, they are turning to other parts of the world, in the Southeast U.S. particularly," said Kurt Buhlmann, a University of Georgia reptile expert.

The number of snappers shipped from the U.S. to Asia — mainly China — skyrocketed from about 129,500 in 2003 to 683,300 in 2010, according to federal figures. Snappers are popular because they carry a lot of meat.

Snappers' little-different ancestors survived whatever killed the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. But experts say the animals can't withstand heavy trapping because they are slow to reproduce. Snappers often don't lay eggs until they are in their teens, and most eggs are eaten by raccoons and other predators. To compensate, snappers can live for 50 years or more.

But the big, old ones — those best at reproducing — are the very ones most valued by commercial trappers.

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Tommy Fletcher of Rock Hall, Md., catches snappers from Maryland to North Carolina. He caught about 22,000 pounds during Virginia's June-through-September season last year.

"I'd say you have plenty" of snappers, Fletcher said. "How could I work away from home all summer year after year if the harvest wasn't staying consistent?"

Fletcher occasionally eats turtle pot pies, turtle soup and his favorite, fried turtle.

Fletcher can't get his wife and two children to eat it. "My wife's one of those women, if it ain't USDA-inspected, she don't want nothing to do with it. She won't eat deer or ducks or nothing."

Fletcher takes his turtles to Millington Seafood in Millington, Md., where he gets \$1 a pound for males and \$2 for females.

Females are more valuable because they are sold, as breeders, to turtle farms in Louisiana and other states, said Dave Bishel, co-owner of Millington Seafood, a major snapper buyer in the mid-Atlantic region.

Babies hatched at the farms are sent to China, where they are raised for food, Bishel said. He sells meat from males to U.S. restaurants. He said he sells few adults to China.

Concerns about snapper exports to China are overblown because most of those turtles are the farm-raised babies, Bishel said.

Still, it's a concern when lots of big females are taken from the wild to stock those turtle farms, said Bruce J. Weissgold, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service specialist in the international animal trade.

"To the wild population, it doesn't matter whether (the big females) are butchered or whether they are put in a farm," Weissgold said. "They are now dead to the wild population."

Bishel said snapper populations can remain healthy if states enact reasonable regulations. "I believe it's a species that can be managed."

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The snapper that Colteaux caught in Morris Creek sported on its shell a quarter-sized yellow tag, labeling the creature No. 4, and a transmitter that looked like a lipstick case with a tail, for following its movements. It turned out that Colteaux had caught, outfitted and released the turtle the day before.

Turtle trapping means long, hot days working with heavy animals that smell like river mud and a sardines-and-shrimp concoction that baits the traps.

"That smell stays with you through several showers," Colteaux said. "It's a glamorous life, I know."

Colteaux returned to the waist-deep water, gave the snapper a little toss at arm's length, and No. 4 went back to his ancient endeavors.