

Summary of Snapping Turtle Workgroup Meeting October 22, 2008

Members in Attendance: Ray Bosmans, Steve Cohey, Jack Cover, John Edwards, Mike Johnson, Craig Mask, Rick Morin, Rich Seigel, Alex Siess (for Peter Paul van Dijk), Scott Smith

DNR Staff: Glenn Therres

Guests: Pat Cain, Hollis Lowe, Teal Richards

Handouts: Notice of Tri-Annual Fisheries Service Regulatory Scoping Public Meeting, Fisheries Management for Fishermen (pages 26-28 on Limited Entry), Limited Entry for Commercial Fishing Licenses (from DNR website)

Welcome & Introductions

Scott Smith welcomed the returning and new members and allowed members and guests to introduce themselves.

Scott discussed a GIS mapping problem for snapping turtle habitat and asked for salinity parameters to limit the higher salinity distribution. Mike Johnson pointed out that the point of the original request was to examine the area subject to harvest in relation to the overall habitat of the species.

Scott clarified the proposed changes to regulations for other turtle species in January through March 2008. Glenn Therres explained that a second letter explained what was adopted in April or May.

Review of 10-08-08 Meeting Summary

The only correction to the 10-08-08 meeting summary was provided by Craig Mask, correcting the spelling of Carl Roscher.

Management Actions to Achieve Goal of 50% protection of females

Rick reviewed the scientific recommendation of 50% protection of mature females and explained that there are many options available to achieve that level of protection. Steve Cohey asked if 40% wasn't pretty close to the 50% goal and Mike Johnson said that if the females from freshwater are included, then the level of protection must exceed 50%. Craig suggested requesting funds to examine the question concerning whether the freshwater areas are supporting the population in tidal water.

Rick also notified the group about the scoping meeting on Thursday Oct 30.

Rick passed out handouts explaining limited entry. Rick explained the language of limited entry in fisheries generally. In MD, watermen first heard the term applied to the

limited entry of commercial licenses and then later to flounder, black sea bass, horseshoe crabs, and striped bass. The limited entry is done in consultation with stakeholders. Rick explained some methods such as total allowable catch (TAC), stock assessments, allocations based on equal shares or determined by past catch, and control dates. Craig warned about unintended consequences in limited entry fisheries. He indicated that people would not be moving into the fishery when it declines, but would like to have that option in an increasing or expanding fishery. Rich Seigel asked what the options could be. Rick defined an open fishery managed entirely with a larger size limit and seasons vs. a limited access fishery with the 10.5" size limit. Rick explained that the snapper fishery has no control on effort (# of pots or # of fishermen). Mike Johnson said he would not have a hard time with a limited entry fishery. Rich would rather stay with the 10.5" size limit and a limited entry. His concern with an open fishery is that if people move in and hammer the fishery it will take 5+ years to recover. Limited entry will be much more effective in the long term. Rich pointed out that we cannot predict future demand, and he's uncomfortable with new people coming in and hammering the population and then leaving the diminished population to those who have been in the fishery for the past 10 years. Craig suggested that the people with TFL and snapper permits could be the limited group. The rest of the group felt that this was not sufficiently limiting and that there were already too many permits. Mike asked how many permits were issued and Scott referred to the minutes of Dianne's presentation on 10-08 and read that there were 47 permits with 27 outstanding applications, which the group felt was already too many. John indicated that he has been excluded from other fisheries and has no problem limiting participants to this one. Steve then warned that people would hear that the fishery was about to be closed which would allow people to get into it. Steve made the comparison with the terrapin limited entry – in which many more people entered who never participated in the fishery before. Alex asked about people jumping in already to obtain the permits. Rich Seigel asked if there was a requirement to allow people to continue to obtain permits. John indicated that we could go back to 2004 – 05 for eligibility. Rich asked what would be unfair about going back 2,3,4 years & allow them permits, otherwise they could go on a waitlist. Rich pointed out that a limited resource requires a limited number of people. Craig then compared this to crabs and appeals for allocations. Rich related his experience with a turtle group in FL looking into turtle harvest with no communication between scientists and trappers. That group recommended a bag limit of two turtles and the state Fisheries Director increased the daily catch 10 fold, with no scientific basis. Everyone is allowed to enter this fishery because they see the future and it will be harvested very heavily and leave little for the traditional fishermen. Craig repeated that this is the best committee he has ever seen, and hopes that we revisit this every year and re-examine with science, adjusting regulations each year. Rick explained that if the population crashes after 2 or 3 years of heavy harvest, it will be too late for small incremental regulation changes. Rich said if we did a limited entry, we could do it from this date backward. He provided an example of high demand and its consequences by saying if China lost turtles and everybody jumped in to harvest MD snappers, there would be one banner year and then there would be 5 or 10 bad years before recovery. Steve explained how he fished according to a rotation book, using about a 6 year rotation. Steve also felt that people are already jumping in to the fishery, but it takes a lot to fish out an area. Mike asked if we could compromise with freezing the number of permits we have now.

Steve said he also wanted fewer permits but questioned if that was fair to knock people out of a fishery when their TFL allows them to harvest. Mike responded that “There’s a place where fair is ferris wheels and cotton candy”. Steve also pointed out that for a few years, he’s behind someone else. Mike felt that anyone who hasn’t seen this coming doesn’t need to get up tomorrow and start catching turtles. Alex asked why should it be left open for more people to get permits above the 67. Craig suggested that emergency regulations could be used if things got out of hand. He said furbearers have people jumping in and they typically don’t last. Hollis Lowe explained that he went through the state apprenticeship program for 5 years, working for free before getting his TFL and doesn’t want to lose his chance to harvest snappers.

Nuisance Wildlife Permits

Scott reviewed the issues surrounding nuisance wildlife permits, the requirements to release animals within two miles, and the questions about selling the catch. He emphasized that such sales were not to be considered commercial fishing, but an option for disposal of the nuisance turtles. Glenn added that snapping turtles are still legally considered a fish, and that one DNR unit cannot undercut a sister unit. He added that according to Fisheries Service, you cannot fish commercially in non-tidal waters.

Craig said that he’d done his homework and researched this issue since the last meeting. According to people within USDA, there are very few calls for nuisance turtles. Craig proposed changing the regulation to allow wildlife control operators (WCO) to sell snappers over 10.5” with a bag limit of 5/day and no more than 50/year, with the sales recorded on disposition forms. Steve Cohey was opposed to any WCO sale of snappers. Glenn pointed out that there are about 200 licensed WCOs statewide. Someone quickly calculated that if every WCO sold 50 snappers, that would amount to 10,000 animals; if they averaged 10 pounds, that would be a harvest of 100,000 pounds of snapping turtles from freshwater. The workgroup considered this to be an excessively risky loophole and does not recommend the sale of nuisance turtles by the WCO.

Summary & Recommendations

The snapping turtle workgroup unanimously recommends a minimum size limit of 10.5” curved carapace length (CCL). In addition, the workgroup unanimously recommends an immediate cap on the number of permits as a first step in limiting access to the snapping turtle fishery.

The workgroup also recommends that DNR continue to fund studies on snapping turtles. The workgroup recommends exploring methods to reduce excessive predation on eggs and juveniles (also by waterfront crabpots). The workgroup recommends that the group continue to meet, examine the results of new studies, and refine criteria to adjust the number of permits over time.