

## **Summary: Snapping Turtle Workgroup Meeting 7 March 2012**

**Workgroup Members in Attendance:** Dave Bishel, Ray Bosmans, Jack Cover, Craig Mask, Rick Morin, Rich Seigel, Joe Rohlfing, Joe Rohlfing Jr., Peter Paul van Dijk

**DNR Fisheries in Attendance:** Matt Lawrence, Allison Luettel, Sarah Widman

**Handouts:** Snapping turtle COMAR, Recommendations of the Management Working Group of the USFWS Conservation and Trade Management of Freshwater and Terrestrial Turtles in the United States, September 20-24, 2010, Point Assignment Schedule of COMAR showing points for snapping turtle violations (#34-39).

### **Welcome & Introductions**

After a brief welcome and explanation of missing workgroup members, the workgroup members introduced themselves and the guests were asked to introduce themselves. The meeting was well attended by Towson University graduate students and watermen. We attempted to record the meeting because we value the comments, but technology let us down as the recording device failed after 30 minutes (we will ask Santa for new rechargeable batteries).

### **History and Background of the Snapping Turtle Fishery**

Rick Morin explained the history of the snapping turtle fishery by a powerpoint presentation that was an updated version of a presentation he made in September 2010 at the workshop "Conservation and Trade Management of Freshwater and Terrestrial Turtles in the United States" convened and hosted by USFWS, International Wildlife Trade Program.

Snapping turtles have been found in archaeological excavations in the Chesapeake region to at least the Woodland period (1000BC-1600AD). They were used in colonial America as food by settlers and slaves and recorded in the commercial fishery in 1873. The commercial fishery was unmanaged for over 100 years. Snapping turtles were viewed as a nuisance until recently, when their role in the ecosystem as a scavenger and predator has been recognized. They continue to be blamed for duckling predation, with very little supporting evidence. Increased international demand starting in the late 1990's led DNR to seek management authority for this unmanaged species and enabling legislation passed in 2007. A workgroup, representative of all stakeholders and scientific experts in snapping turtles was assembled and first met in 2007. Workgroup members came from turtle harvesters, chosen from their harvest reports, scientists from Towson University and the University of MD, National Aquarium in Baltimore, Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society, seafood dealers, an aquaculturist, Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators and Maryland Trappers Association, Conservation International/IUCN, as well as MD DNR (Fisheries Service, Wildlife and Heritage Service, Natural Resources Police). This workgroup recommended limits to the previously unregulated commercial fishery and to keeping as pets. Further population study was highly recommended to Fisheries Service

(FS). Those recommendations resulted in emergency interim regulations in 2008. Based upon a snapping turtle study by Pat Cain and Rich Seigel of Towson University, in cooperation with waterman John Edwards, data were presented and discussed by the workgroup in 2008. Those data were used to develop 3 management options to present to the workgroup. The recommendations for the regulations in place today were agreed upon by all stakeholders at the last meeting in November 2008 and became permanent starting in 2009. The commercial industry and scientists agreed that these recommendations were the best option for maintaining sustainability. The 11" minimum CCL possession limit was crucial because it protected over 60% of females. This regulation prohibits possession of turtles under 11" in MD even if they were legally harvested in another state. In addition to the minimum size limit, turtles may only be legally harvested in tidal waters, harvest reports are required, and gear restrictions and float requirements are in effect. Personal use and pet regulations limit possession to one turtle and gear restrictions apply. There is an assumption that non-tidal waters are sanctuaries in effect and that movement may occur between non-tidal and tidal waters.

The snapping turtle workgroup has been a noteworthy example of cooperation and collaboration among members. Open discussions included honesty about what we know and don't know about tidal snapping turtles. Meetings were noted for the willingness to listen, contribute to the discussion, and compromise to build consent, without sacrificing the overall goal of managing for sustainability.

Commercial harvest of snapping turtles is allowed only by those in possession of commercial tidal fish license (TFL) or Conch-Turtle-Lobster license (CTL), both of which are limited in number. In addition to the commercial fishing license, a snapping turtle permit was first required in 2008. This permit requires daily reports for number of turtles harvested, pounds, area, number of traps set and the disposition of the catch. This data should also be reported on the required finfish report. The data on the snapping turtle permit form are important because, lacking a stock assessment, the catch-per-unit effort (CPUE) and turtle size over time can be used to examine possible overfishing.

Rick provided updated summary statistics for permits issued and compliance. The first year in which permits were required (in effect July 1) saw 55 permits issued, which was 76% of the harvesters who reported harvest on their finfish reports for any part of 2008. The report compliance for the first year was 84%. In the second year, 115 permits were issued and permit compliance rose to 98% with report compliance rising to 90%. In 2010 and 2011, 78 and 80 permits were issued with 100% permit compliance and report compliance continuing to rise to 92 and 96%. Approximately 50% of the permittees actually participated in the fishery. In 2008, 29 harvesters reported 137K pounds. In 2009, the first year of the 11" minimum size limit, harvest dropped to 106K pounds and 113K pounds in 2010; 2011 harvest rose to 128K pounds. In every year, the top 6 harvesters harvest over 57% of the total.

MD DNR has already met most of the findings and recommendations of the Management Working Group of the USFWS meeting. Future needs include monitoring CPUE and size, establishing regional management relationships with neighboring states, continuing

the workgroup management process, identifying funding sources for research needs, and the inclusion of snapping turtles in discussions about latent effort and limited entry fisheries.

In the Q&A session following this presentation, workgroup members and watermen guests expressed support for the 11” minimum size limit. Watermen remarked that they were catching and releasing many small turtles and recognized the importance of those to recruitment into the fishery.

### **Permit Application Process & Harvest Reports**

Allison Luettel presented an overview of the application process for snapping turtle permits. Allison emphasized that all harvest reports from a harvester must be received before a new permit will be issued to that harvester. The reports are required by the 10<sup>th</sup> of the following month. Reports are required even if there is no harvest because it is a requirement of the permit and because zeros are data. The same information should be reported on the finfish reports. Harvest reports that are incomplete will be returned.

In 2012, postpaid envelopes will not be provided to harvesters due to budget constraints. In addition, to save postage, Allison will mail out the first 4 months of harvest reports (March through June) and will send additional months if they are requested.

### **Ranavirus**

Dr. Rich Seigel, Towson University, kindly agreed to present his findings on Ranavirus as it has been discovered in box turtles at the ICC site. Rich provided an overview of the disease, its initial discovery among frogs of the genus *Rana*, and how the disease is manifested in box turtles. Rich shared some video of how the disease progresses and the speed with which it kills box turtles. This video is very compelling and sad as the turtles appear to suffocate in their mucus. Rich informed the group that Ranavirus has been discovered in snapping turtles in PA. There is no known treatment. The mode of transmission is unknown. It is not known if infected snapping turtles will trap or if they will die at the bottom and not be seen. Box turtles have died within four days of displaying symptoms. Samples are sent to the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, WI .

There are far more questions than answers about Ranavirus at this point. However, Dr. Seigel explained that it would be helpful for researchers to obtain some direction from DNR.

### **New Business**

Red-eared sliders: Few attendees were aware that invasive red-eared sliders could be harvested in tidal waters and sold. Watermen and Dave Bishel, who has bought Mike Johnson’s seafood business, believed that it was illegal, but there could be a market is it

was both legal and if there was anyone who would buy them. This could be researched further for a possible policy position paper by Policy and Regulations Division of FS.

Winter season: No snapping turtles are harvested in Maryland between November and February. Should the workgroup recommend a closed season for those months? The consensus was that this would not be worth the effort since snapping turtles are not traditionally harvested in the winter, that harvest would be small and difficult as they do not trap in winter, and the market is uncertain. Closing a winter season at this point is not recommended.

Regional Management: Maryland is in the leader in snapping management among mid-Atlantic states. The workgroup is in favor of continuing to provide assistance to neighboring states to assist them in managing based on science for sustainability.

### **Fair Allocation of watermen representation on workgroup**

The watermen were queried about how best to fairly assign commercial representatives on the workgroup. No watermen objected to the present method and there was no clear consensus about regional representation, except that commercial representatives should be actual harvesters with knowledge of the fishery. The watermen expressed satisfaction with the practice of open discussion at the meetings and were not concerned about any necessary formality of official membership on the workgroup. It was explained that the workgroup is not operated in such a way to vote and deprive any particular stakeholders. We will continue to have vetted watermen as official representatives on the workgroup and to allow open discussion with any watermen in attendance as we feel that this discussion benefits our knowledge of the fishery.

### **Conclusions**

No new regulations are recommended. It will take more years to determine if a long-lived reptile species like the snapping turtle can be managed for sustainability with an 11" size limit. At the present time, this management approach seems to be working.

Ranavirus is a newly emerging disease of concern. The role of DNR in such an emerging disease issue should be discussed.