

## COMMENTARIES

Killing Animals for Profit<sup>1</sup>

Carl Hiaasen, Miami Herald

If your kids asked to bury a small animal alive, you'd be horrified. You'd tell them that's an awful thing and that they ought to be ashamed. Most children wouldn't dream of doing it, of course, because they know what's wrong and what's right. Unfortunately, they don't make the rules.

Consider Florida's poor, pokey Gopher Tortoise. Since 1991, the state has allowed grown-ups to bury 74,000 of them because their burrows stood in the path of future subdivisions, highways, golf courses, and supermarkets. Officials prefer the word *entomb* instead of *bury*, but it's the same dirty deed. Even on his most fleet-footed day, the average tortoise cannot outrace earth-moving machinery. Some are able to tunnel to freedom, but most suffocate slowly over a period of weeks.

Gopher tortoises have been around for 60 million years, but the last few decades have been murder. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission classifies these ancient land turtles as a "species of special concern," although obviously not special enough to be left in peace. A child can't legally keep one as a pet, yet a big company or even a school district can obtain permits to snuff them by the hundreds.

Dwindling in numbers, the animals live in dry hammocks, coastal dunes, and pine scrub. There they dig elaborate dens that provide shelter to more than 300 other species, including rabbits, burrowing owls, and the endangered Indigo Snake. As

luck would have it, prime tortoise habitat is often prime real estate, which means the tortoises get the boot or, more typically, the bulldozer. The state calls this "incidental taking," which is a bureaucratically sanitized way of saying "smothering to death."

The permit process is straightforward. Developers seeking to build on land colonized by tortoises typically agree to contribute to a habitat fund, or set aside a relatively small parcel. It's called mitigation, a lame charade intended to make the state appear vigilant and to make developers appear caring. In the past 10 months, Florida has granted 345 permits to bury tortoises. The [South Florida] *Sun-Sentinel* recently published a sampling:

- The Tuscano golf course development near Sarasota got permission to kill 260 of the reptiles in exchange for preserving 138 acres.
- In Duval County, the Young Land Group was told it could destroy 190 tortoises if it paid \$169,442 for 29 acres of habitat.
- The Orange County Public Schools got permission to kill 110 tortoises on the future site of a high school, in exchange for preserving 12 acres at a cost of \$92,037.

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GLUCK, SCHAEFER

Since 1991, the state has allowed the burial of 74,000 Gopher Tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*) because their burrows stood in the path of future subdivisions, highways, golf courses, and supermarkets.

- Vikings LLC in Marion County was approved to wipe out 470 tortoises for a 542-home golf course development, in exchange for preserving 136 acres.
- In Palm Beach County, Wal-Mart got permission to bury five tortoises in exchange for a whopping 1.49 acres of habitat. Mitigation is always meager. A pending project in the Tampa Bay area would obliterate 2,573 acres of tortoise habitat, yet under current rules the developer is required to set aside only 168 acres. That's a net loss to the tortoises of 93 percent of their home territory.

News accounts about the tortoise-burying permits have angered many Floridians and discomfited wildlife officials, who admit that not enough is being done to save the reptiles. The state now wants to expand tortoise preserves in the Panhandle, which sounds like a plan, except that moving the critters hasn't worked. Studies have shown that most of the relocated newcomers have died from respiratory disease or other ailments.

#### Process as Slow as the Tortoise

Four years ago, the FWCC staff proposed elevating the status of

the Gopher Tortoise to a "threatened species," which theoretically would offer more protection from habitat loss. No action was taken, and the sanctioned killings continued.

Several local governments decided there was no time to lose. Lee, Collier, Martin, and Hillsborough counties adopted ordinances that made it more difficult to destroy the species, even with a permit.

On 7 June, the state wildlife commission convenes in West Palm Beach, a public meeting at which the plight of the Gopher Tortoise finally will be addressed. A key factor will be the "risk of extinction," which grows worse with every mass burial. If commissioners agree that the species should be reclassified as threatened, biologists and administrators will begin drafting a management plan. It's a process as slow and lumbering as the tortoise itself.

In the meantime, officials say they're working with developers and landowners to deal with the "entombment issue," which has turned into a serious public-relations headache. There's nothing "incidental" about burying an animal alive. Just ask your kids. They'll know better.

## Are Alligator Snappers Out Of The Soup?<sup>1</sup>

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South Carolina and Louisiana have major problems with some of their senior citizens. As summer begins, Louisiana will have begun to address the problem for one group. South Carolina will still be seeking a solution for their denizens. The problem relates not to AARP members but to turtles: How to control their removal from the wild by commercial turtle trappers. Neither state can afford to lose many more of their native turtles and keep their natural heritage intact. Recent positive action by the Louisiana senate regarding one species bears mentioning.

One of the most magnificent reptiles in America is the Alligator Snapping Turtle (*Macrolemys temminckii*), a species that is fast disappearing from southern rivers and swamps. The giant turtle, one of the largest freshwater turtles in the world, gets bigger than the adults of some sea turtles. Typical adults can weigh more than 100 pounds and the record is more than 200. Alligator Snappers have a come-hither scam that operates quite effectively with hungry fish. The turtle sits on the bottom with its mouth open. Its bright red tongue wiggles like a worm. As unsuspecting fish move in for a meal, they become a meal themselves when the unseen con artist slams its jaws shut.

Alligator Snappers inhabit the Mississippi River drainage and are found as far east as southern Georgia, west to Texas, and north to Indiana, although not in the Carolinas. Once they were in virtually all large rivers throughout their geographic range. Recently, their numbers were estimated to be less than five percent of what they once were, and still declining. All but one state (Louisiana) had passed laws to protect these mighty creatures from the assaults of commercial trapping. I think it safe to say that they are part of the natural world that most Americans would like to preserve.

Louisiana may actually make that a reality. Louisiana Senate Resolution No. 49 introduced by Sen. Robert J. Barham is "to urge and request the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and



SUZANNE L. COLLINS, OMAH

Alligator Snapping Turtles (*Macrolemys temminckii*) are fast disappearing from southern rivers and swamps.

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