

- 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?¹

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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



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

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Fisheries to place a moratorium on the taking of Alligator Snapping Turtles.” The resolution notes that these turtles have “historically been a vital and integral part of the Louisiana wildlife ecosystem [and are] presently suffering excessive exploitation for meat in local commercial markets, as well as an increasing international market.”

The impact of such a resolution will go far in setting the system right for Alligator Snappers in Louisiana. Other states should consider taking similar steps to protect their turtle species. Although resolutions are only suggestions, and the state’s wildlife department does not have to honor them, such a suggestion by a state senate is a positive start. The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission has now taken action and voted to “stop the taking and possession of Alligator Snapping Turtles by anybody with a commercial license.” Recreational trapping of Alligator Snappers was not affected.

I asked Dr. Joseph Pechmann, a biologist at the University of New Orleans, how he thought the Louisiana senate had ever

been able to pass a resolution that would protect the turtles. “They accepted the idea that part of Louisiana’s natural heritage was going to disappear if commercial harvest was allowed to continue. Recreational harvesting of Alligator Snappers is a pastime important to many in the state, but the current levels of commercial removal were clearly unsustainable.”

The southeastern turtle saga is not over, and I’m not sure how it will end before meaningful regulations are in place in all states. I do know the loss of Alligator Snappers from the commercial scene will have little effect on the turtle soup au sherry at Commander’s Palace restaurant in New Orleans. But I do not know whether the South Carolina legislature will realize that it must now step forward and take some action to protect its own turtles. When I asked Dr. Pechmann how he personally felt about the resolution to protect the giant turtles in Louisiana, he said, “It’s about time.” Let’s hope tight restrictions on overharvesting will not be too late coming for Alligator Snappers in Louisiana, or for other turtles elsewhere.

Global Climate Change: Should You Care?

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About ten years ago, I was seated at a large lecture hall at Ohio State University, waiting for an economist to talk about environmental issues. It’s good to get a different perspective every once in a while, after all. The speaker was clear: “I don’t believe for a moment that global climate change is happening,” he stated emphatically, then paused for dramatic effect. “But if it is,” he continued, “all that means is that we need bigger and better air conditioners!” Reactions in the room were mixed. About one third of the listeners cheered, another third seemed unclear about what he had said, and the final third were close to apoplectic. A decade later, things have not changed much. Some people are still warning that the future does not look good. The remainder appears to be divided between those happy not to think about environmental issues and an influential sector that pretends nothing is going on or that bigger AC units will solve our problems.

So, does a problem really exist? Much of the U.S. political and business leadership has spent the last decade or more claiming either that climate change is not occurring or that it is occurring as a consequence of natural processes over which we have no control. Recently, this argument received surprising support from author Michael Crichton. His 2004 book, *State of Fear*, used a hunt for environmental terrorists as a device for bashing environmentalists, and especially anything to do with climate change. Sounding a lot like my economist, one of the characters stated (p. 407): “The threat of global warming is essentially nonexistent. Even if it were a real phenomenon, it would probably result

in a net benefit to most of the world.” Although climate scientists have repeatedly shown the book to be scientifically lacking, an adventure yarn is certainly entitled to have a preposterous premise (consider some of Crichton’s other novels, such as *Jurassic Park*, for which one must suspend any critical analysis to enjoy the story). However, for the U.S. Senate to invite Mr. Crichton to testify on environmental issues is just wrong — and my students using his fiction as an authority by which to reject the evidence compiled by many hundreds of scientists is even worse. Science is built on observing a phenomenon and making predictions that are supported by previous knowledge. A climate expert would know that CO₂ acts as a greenhouse gas and would consequently predict that global climate will change in certain ways if CO₂ levels continue to rise.

Could climate change scientists be wrong? Of course they could. Our data remain limited, and the pattern that has emerged might not be representative of long-term trends. Nonetheless, we have to work with the data at hand, revealed by multiple scientific papers and reports by individual scientists and national and international bodies. The hallmark of science is to test those predictions, which have so far proven depressingly realistic, varying only in assessments of the extent to which the damage will accrue. The scientific community overwhelmingly agrees: Global climate change is occurring, appears to be tied to human activities, and is likely to have devastating effects on both people and other organisms. Because of the magnitude of the impacts and