

New Florida Rule Limits Take and Possession of Freshwater Turtles

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“If we allowed it, the Chinese — more than one billion Chinese — could and probably would eat every single turtle in existence in Florida in one year.”

*Dale Jackson
Biologist*

“The ... new regulations will provide the best protection for freshwater turtles in any state in the U.S. and establish Florida as a leader on this issue in North America.”

IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group

“This decision may be one of Florida’s greatest conservation stories.”

*Brian Yablonski, Commissioner
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) recently passed new rules regulating the take and possession of freshwater turtles to ensure the long-term persistence of these animals. The new rule, which took effect on 20 July 2009, prohibits taking or possessing any wild turtles from the state’s imperiled species list, including Alligator Snapping Turtles (*Macrochelys temminckii*), Barbour’s Map Turtles (*Graptemys barbouri*), and Suwannee Cooters (*Pseudemys suwanniensis*). Take of species that are similar in appearance to those that are imperiled also is prohibited. Other freshwater turtles not mentioned above can be taken throughout the year, except for Softshells (*Apalone* sp.), for which a closed season extends from May through July — but only for non-commercial use, and take is limited to one turtle per person per day for most species. The take of turtle eggs is prohibited.



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Suwannee Cooters (*Pseudemys suwanniensis*) share a basking site with a Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*).



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New rules prohibit entirely the take of state imperiled species, such as Barbour's Map Turtles (*Graptemys barbouri*; left) and Alligator Snapping Turtles (*Macrochelys temminckii*; right). Individuals who keep them as pets will be required to obtain a permit.

Florida has one of the most diverse freshwater turtle faunas (18 species) in the United States, and now it also has one of the strongest measures to protect them. Oklahoma and Texas have banned harvests from public waters or land, whereas South Carolina is restricting the harvest of certain species. Nevertheless, in certain parts of Florida, turtles still can be found on some restaurant menus. However, the real concern comes from the ever-growing numbers of turtles exported each year from the United States to Asia.

In recent years, the demand for turtles has grown dramatically in China, largely attributable to that nation's rapid economic devel-

opment (Shi et al. 2007). Many turtle species native to China and surrounding countries are either threatened or facing extinction due to unsustainable harvests and ever-increasing demand for human consumption (van Dijk et al. 2000). Thousands of Florida turtles are exported each year, and conservationists are concerned that wild populations will face a fate similar to those in Asia. The conservation community reacted by promoting the new legislation, which was supported by Florida Governor Charlie Crist.

Turtles are considered to be a delicacy in many Asian countries. Some also believe that turtle meat can strengthen human immune



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Florida Redbellied Turtles (*Pseudemys nelsoni*) take flight when disturbed at a commercial turtle farm in Florida.



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Softshell turtles, such as this Florida Softshell (*Apalone ferox*), may still be taken in small numbers, but a closed season for softshells extends from May through July.

systems or even cure cancer. Turtle plastra are used in traditional Chinese medicine to make a “turtle jelly” that supposedly has curative powers (van Dijk et al. 2000).

Most of the demand has been met by commercial turtle farms, but the commercial collection of wild turtles appeared to be on the rise, although the actual number taken from the wild is unknown. Wild turtles are believed to have more health benefits to humans, and turtle farmers believe wild turtles are better

breeders. Although the current demand continues to grow, some conservationists believe that the rate will decline as many younger Chinese are becoming increasingly westernized and do not believe in traditional Chinese medicine and the proclaimed health benefits of eating turtles. Unfortunately, that will be too late for many turtles — at least those from Florida may not be subjected to that fate.

Although individuals who keep imperiled species as pets will now be required to possess a permit, the most dramatic impact of the new FWC rule most likely will be felt by commercial fishermen who hunt turtles for additional income and the state’s roughly 28 licensed turtle farmers who rely on wild turtles to replenish captive stock. Some turtle fishermen claim that they could lose as much as \$10,000 per year in extra income, but supporters of the ban say it was absolutely necessary to keep the state’s turtle populations from collapsing.

More information about Florida freshwater turtles and the new rule on take and possession can be found at the FWC website: www.myfwc.com/WILDLIFEHABITATS/SpeciesInfo_FreshwaterTurtles.htm.

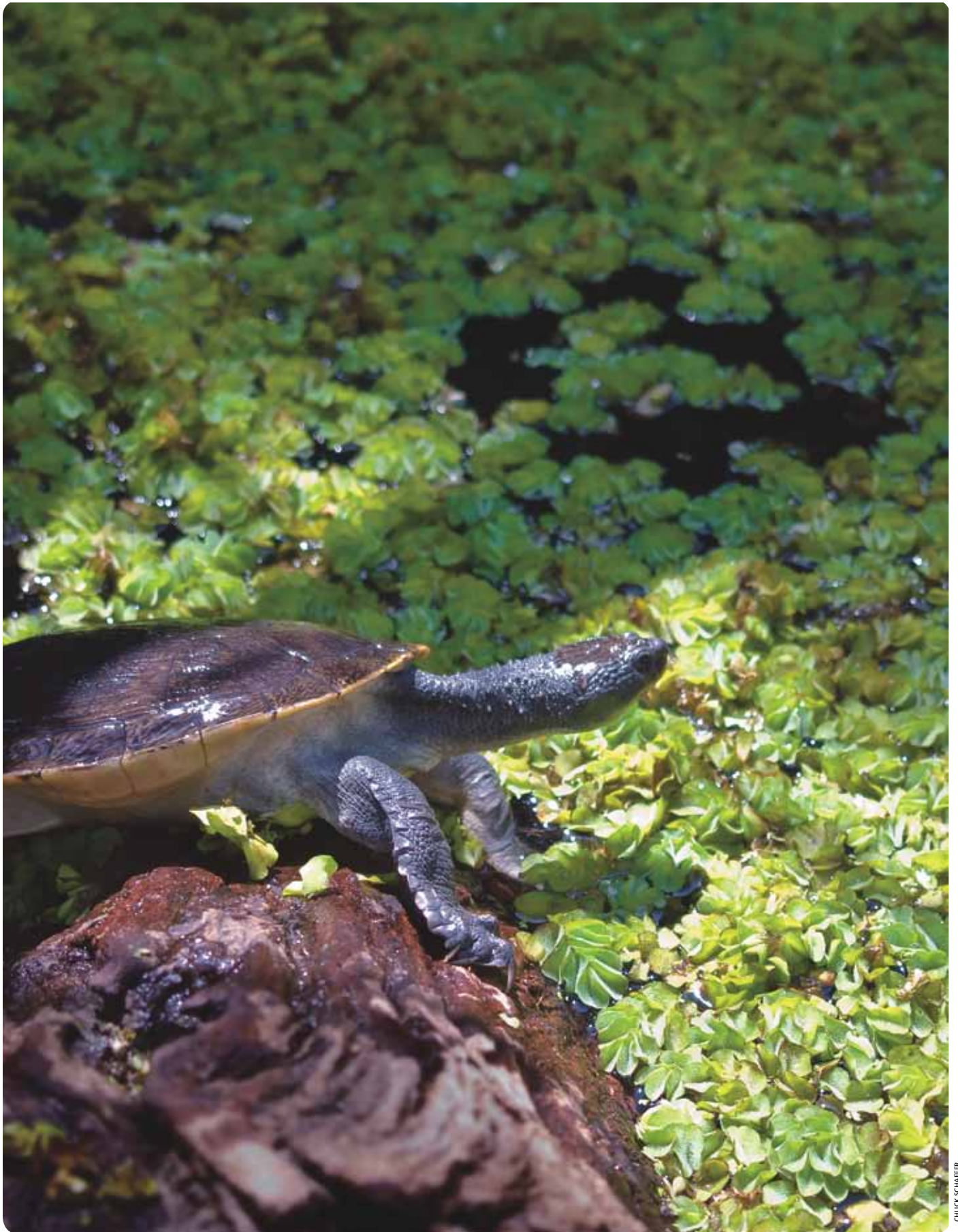
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State-endangered species, such as this Striped Mud Turtle (*Kinosternon baurii*), are afforded additional protection under new regulations recently passed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.



CHUCK SCHAFFER

Mary River Turtle (*Elusor macrurus*)