

OPERATION SHELLSHOCK

2006-2009



An Undercover Initiative by The
Division of Law Enforcement of
The New York State Department
of Environmental Conservation

GOAL

To identify and address the illegal
collecting, possession, and Black
Market Trade in New York's
Native Reptiles and Amphibians

Why “Herps?”

- New York States Reptiles and Amphibians are considered “indicator” species. With tremendous sensitivity to pollution, they tell us, through disappearance, disease, and deformities, when things are not right with the environment. Overall, their existence is directly related to public health and safety. And, they significantly contribute to the quality of life.

BIODIVERSITY...

...is the variety of all things living on earth. It is a life system that we as humans are part of. Biodiversity is fundamental to our existence.

Wildlife such as reptiles and amphibians that you may have considered slimy, frightful and ugly, are creatures we can't live without.

This was not just about laws...

The Threats To The Resource

Habitat Loss and
Fragmentation

Disease

Pollution

Invasive Species

Climate Change

and...



Illegal collecting and commercialization

With all the other threats putting so much pressure on species, illegal collecting and the black market act as a final “Nail In The Coffin.”



Fragmentation



Illegal collecting

So what Herps are we protecting?

- The New York Native Species are:
- 18 species of salamanders
- 14 species of frogs
- 17 species of turtles
- 3 species of lizards and skinks
- 17 species of snakes



Shellshock's Objectives

- Identify illegal markets for native reptiles and amphibians
- Identify weaknesses in our laws
- Identify illegal cross border trade in New York's Reptiles and Amphibians
- Identify violators through covert means and develop cases for prosecution
- "Follow through" with enforcement training and public education to promote better protection and stewardship
- Develop a database of intelligence to formulate patrol objectives and situational response to better protect indicator species

The Timing Was Right

Administration open to the task at hand

Increased complaints regarding illegal Herp activity

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission poised to run parallel operation with NY

Increased public support for reptile and amphibian protection

Increased enforcement authority through more comprehensive laws



Our Targets?.....NO!!!



Wildlife Crimes are committed by people with...

Knowledge of the laws and...



Intent to break them,
usually for possession or
monetary gain.

The Legal Toolbox

- All Native New York Reptiles and Amphibians are now protected by law
- Many listed as “game” species with no season
- Some given additional protection as Endangered and Threatened Species
- Change in wording of regulations to protect “all life forms” (eggs)
- Federal statutes, such as the Lacey Act

Sec. 11-0107. Application of Fish and Wildlife Law.

1. No person shall take...
2. No person shall, at any time of the year, buy, sell, offer or expose for sale, transport, or have in his possession any fish protected by law, game, protected wildlife, shellfish, harbor seals, crustacea protected by law, or part thereof, or protected insect, whether taken within the state or coming from without the state, except as permitted by the Fish and Wildlife Law.

Sec. 71-0924. Illegal commercialization of fish, shellfish, crustaceans, and wildlife.

when a violation involves the sale, trade or barter of fish, shellfish, crustaceans, wildlife, or parts thereof, the sale, trade or barter of which is prohibited by the fish and wildlife Law...

\$0-250.00

violation

\$251-1499.00

misdemeanor

\$1500 and up

felony

Bog Turtle \$2,000



E. Massasauga “Priceless”



Spotted Turtle \$125-\$400



Timber Rattlesnake \$175-\$300



Common Snapping Turtle

\$1.25-2.50/lb. live weight



Large reptile shows were identified as sites of illegal transactions



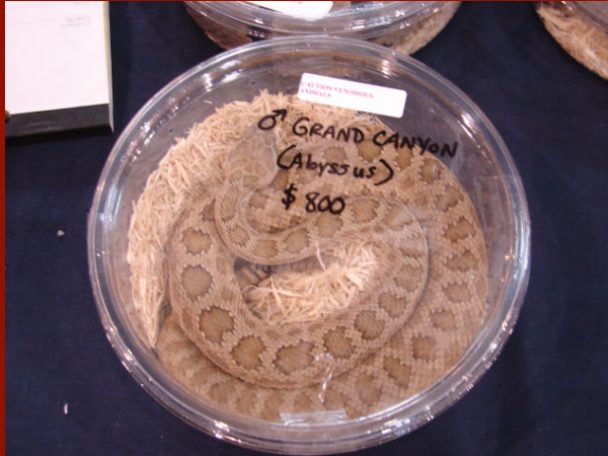
Natives and Endangered Exotics Sold under the Table





And others...

Wildlife for sale at Herp shows



The Internet

The majority of classified ads are legal. Illegal ads are disguised with deceptive information

03/21/08		Baby New Guinea Snapping Turtle	Quality First Pets	Los Fresnos, Texas 78566
03/21/08		Captive Bred Baby Red Ear Sliders	Exotic Pets	Las Vegas, NV - nationwide
03/21/08		Snake Neck Turtles (C. Siebenrocki)	Reptiles of Distinction	Anywhere in the US
03/20/08		TUBERCULATE TOAD HEADED TURTLES - BATRACHEMYS TUBERCULATUS		FLORIDA, USA - WORLDWIDE SHIPPING.
03/20/08		EASTERN BOX TURTLES - cbb 2007! sweet!		=WORLDWIDE= ====FROM==== =MONTCLAIR= =CALIFORNIA=
03/20/08		Baby common snapping turtles - 1000	Adam	USA
03/20/08		STRIPENECK MUSK (STERNOTHERUS MINOR PELTIFER)	Michael	WORLDWIDE SHIPPING

LARGE TURTLES FOR ADOPTION

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[LARGER IMAGE](#)

LARGE

EASTERN PAINTED

TURTLES FOR SALE

(4 TO 6 INCHES)

GREAT FOR PONDS AND AS PETS

Item: #450	Price: \$\$\$	Order
1 EASTERN PAINTED	\$14.95	<input type="button" value="Add to Cart"/>



Illegal Trapping



What Did We Find?

- A very active, lucrative illegal market for native species at shows and on line
- A “culture” within a culture thirsty for possession of increasingly rare species
- Markets outside of New York State influencing the illegal collection in NY
- “Hollow” reasoning to justify possession, breeding, and sale

Case Scenario 1

- A popular herp show vendor, author, and owner of a significant herp related website
- Sold spotted turtles to a covert operator multiple times with knowledge of the illegal act



Case Scenario 2

- Covert Operators bought and sold spotted, wood, and box turtles from members of several turtle conservation organizations
- Targets showed knowledge that act was illegal
- Revealed problems within the special interest community regarding possession, as well as protection



Case Scenario 3

“Wanted-Snapping Turtles”

- This add on Kingsnake.com lead to a relationship with two NY subjects that collected thousands of snapping turtle eggs each year and hatched them
- They then laundered them through a Louisiana turtle farm to Chinese buyers overseas

Case Scenario 4

A target claiming to be one of the largest turtle buyers in the Eastern US purchased over 2,000 pounds of live snapping turtles from NY covert operatives with knowledge their harvest was illegal.



Case Scenario 5

International Smuggling



“Looking for
trustworthy
Americans to
trade
rattlesnakes”

Investigators answered the above internet post and connected with a Canadian Poacher

A Model For Cooperation

- NYSDEC
- Environment Canada
- Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
- USFWS
- Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission
- US Immigration and Customs Enforcement
- New York State Police

33 Rattlesnakes hidden in a minivan's compartments



Case Scenario 6



It all started with a
salamander for
sale...



And ended with an illegal collector selling covert investigators many species

Results

- Covert Investigators witnessed over 2,600 violations of laws protecting reptiles and amphibians
- 32 defendants were charged in New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Louisiana and Canada with misdemeanors and felonies
- State and Federal Investigations Continue
- Over \$125,000 recovered in fines and penalties
- The public is now more aware of our commitment to protect our native wildlife and biodiversity in New York

The Future

- Continue training and awareness for LE
- Increase dialogue between LE and wildlife managers.
- Expand and promote intel sharing
- Continue to develop and maintain herp enforcement data base.
- Use Shellshock as a springboard for education.

