

Veterinary medicine guides alligator snapping turtle conservation



An alligator snapping turtle sets a threatening pose with its mouth agape.

Brian Fillmore/USFWS

You can't tell the difference between juvenile male and female alligator snapping turtles. The only non-lethal method to determine gender is with the use of a surgical laparoscopic technique. Tishomingo National Fish Hatchery in southern Oklahoma is currently assisting Dr. Day Ligon from Missouri State University and Kay Backues, DVM, Director of Animal Health of the Tulsa Zoo, in generating an age-specific description of juvenile alligator snapping turtle gender-identifying parts. Twelve turtles from three age classes were examined using high-tech procedures performed by Dr. Backues. Images of each turtle were captured and sex determined by the presence or absence of egg follicles, which resemble bubble wrap. Physical exams help to determine the age at which turtles' genitalia begin to show differences. The new techniques will allow hatchery biologists to stock known sex ratios of alligator snapping turtles into the wild, furthering the conservation management of the species by stocking a proper sex ratio. ♦ Brian Fillmore