

Northeast Illegal Turtle Trade Workshop: Enhancing Partnerships to Combat Poaching and Trafficking

Workshop Summary



Wood Turtle by Patrick Randle CC by NC SA 2.0

March 2022



Suggested Citation:

Wixted, K.L. and M.R. Christman, editors. 2022. *Summary of the Northeast Illegal Turtle Trade Workshop: Enhancing Partnerships to Combat Poaching and Trafficking*; 2022 Feb 17-18; Virtual: Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation.

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Introduction:

Wildlife trafficking is a global problem that impacts many species, but an unfortunate confluence of factors makes the illegal collection and trade of turtles and tortoises a particularly troublesome issue, particularly in North America, where turtles are being taken from the wild and trafficked. High demand from both overseas and domestic markets, coupled with life history characteristics of turtles, make populations susceptible to immediate and irreversible declines and put populations of turtles and tortoises at extremely high risk.

This two-day, no-cost, and virtual workshop (full agenda in Appendix I) was designed to bring state, federal, provincial, and tribal wildlife agencies together to learn about illegal trade in turtles, to share experiences, existing resources and strategies, and to identify some priority barriers or needs to address this growing threat to wild turtles native to the Northeastern United States and Southeastern Canada. The workshop was developed by the planning committee listed above and was hosted in partnership among the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation's (PARC) Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT) and Turtle Networking Team (TNT), and Northeast Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (NEPARC) in February 2022. Over 200 participants attended with broad representation among agencies and occupations (Figure 1).

This document was compiled by the workshop planning committee and summarizes key components of the workshop.

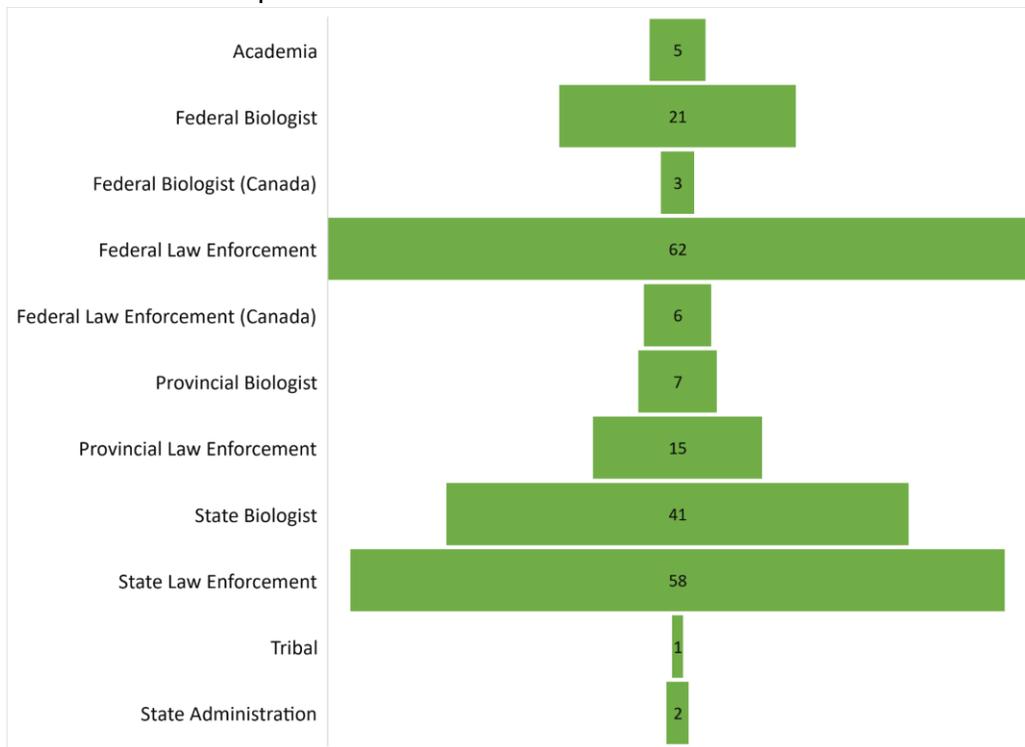


Figure 1: Breakdown of workshop participants by self-identified professional role.

Symposia Summary:

The workshop started with a half-day symposium of presentations outlining why illegal trade in native turtles is an issue needing attention and highlighting the work law enforcement are currently undertaking to combat the issue. Some key challenges and needs by law enforcement were also addressed.

Key Takeaways:

- Adult turtles need to successfully reproduce multiple times over their long lives to achieve reproductive replacement (minimum replacement to avoid population decline solely from low reproductive output). Delayed maturation and high rates of nest predation and juvenile mortality lead to long population recovery times, particularly after reproductive adults have been poached.
- More resources and capacity are needed to conserve and protect native turtles.
- Turtle crimes can involve other criminal activities (e.g., narcotics, illegal firearms, money laundering, bribery).
- Law enforcement are understaffed and could use additional training and resources to address wildlife trafficking.
- There are still large gaps in knowledge on the scope, scale, and impact of the illegal trade in turtles, which highlights a need for consistent data gathering and coordination.
- It is important to establish and maintain strong relationships between biologists, law enforcement, other professionals, and the public to successfully confiscate and care for turtles. Facilities to place confiscated turtles and funding for care is a major concern.
- Turtle location information (e.g., lat/longs, site/wetland names) should not be made public to reduce easy access by collectors of wild species.
- For enforcement and prosecution to be effective, it is important to have stronger penalties and a better understanding of the severity of the problem by prosecutors and judges.

Additional Information/Resources:

- Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) CITES Case Study: https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/7815/9352/0162/Case_Study_U.S._Freshwater_Turtles_and_Tortoises_CITES_2020_FINAL.pdf
- Sustainable Trade in Turtles and Tortoises: Action Plan for North America: <http://www.cec.org/publications/sustainable-trade-in-turtles-and-tortoises-action-plan-for-north-america/>
- The Time is Now Video: <https://youtu.be/DAe-fxd0xOo>
- The Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles: <https://parcplace.org/species/collaborative-to-combat-the-illegal-trade-in-turtles/>
- Assessing Consumer Trends and Illegal Activity by Monitoring the Online Wildlife Trade: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320718307353>
- Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT) Confiscation and Repatriation Working Group Time of Confiscation Protocol: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uKSx2NLLhWCGclw1KXbC3sa1R4pLI83b/view?usp=sharing>

Legal Considerations Summary:

The Legal Considerations workshop asked participants to consider three related questions: **1)** gaps and inconsistencies in statutes and regulations for the conservation of turtles and prosecution of illegal activities concerning turtles, **2)** what an ideal framework for turtle conservation would look like, and **3)** to what extent national legislation would advance these objectives.

Gaps and Inconsistencies: Participants most frequently cited the following gaps in their states:

- an inconsistent patchwork of laws and regulations among states
- lack of regulation for non-native species (including those with high market value)
- lack of communications between law enforcement and biologists
- under-resourced public education programs
- insufficient fines and penalties, and,
- lack of interstate information-sharing.

Ideal Framework: Building on these gaps, participants identified a wide array of legislative and regulatory responses, including but not limited to:

- higher fines and penalties combined with efforts to educate members of the judiciary branch on risks to turtle populations
- increased efforts to tie turtle-related offenses with non-wildlife offenses
- developing capacity for large confiscations (care, housing, etc)
- providing for greater clarity in regulatory language and on applications for licenses and permits
- more stringent certification requirements for captive breeders, and,
- restrictions on take for more species.

National Legislation: When asked whether there is a need for national legislation, participants preferred a regional focus to improve consistency between states, strategic coordination, and dedicated funding. A minority of participants supported national legislation similar to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, while most expressed doubt that such a pathway is viable, or affirmatively supported jurisdiction over state-managed turtles remaining with the states.

At the conclusion of the session, participants were briefed on the next steps for a 2022 Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) resolution coming from the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Committee, Law Enforcement Committee, and Legal Committee supporting these priorities and offering model legislative / regulatory language for states' voluntary consideration.

Human Dimensions Summary:

The Human Dimensions workshop focused on two key areas: situational-crime prevention and internal and external communications and outreach.

Situational-crime prevention focuses on identifying opportunities for crime in a given area and developing targeted interventions to reduce the likelihood of an individual engaging in those activities. Multiple participants commented that training on this topic would be welcomed and suggested bringing this to the attention of law enforcement chiefs. Logistics and costs were concerns participants had over engaging in situational-crime prevention, but solutions such as an existing toolkit and the use of agency social scientists and graduate students to assist with research were offered. Additional discussions included the pros and cons of different deterrence methods, including partnering with community members and groups to increase guardianship of vulnerable areas, recognizing that some individuals might exploit this knowledge for personal profit. Another potential deterrent, using engraving tools or other means to mark the carapace of turtles and make them undesirable to poachers, raised some concerns about animal ethics and unintended consequences, like increasing the value of unmarked turtles.

Themes like the challenge of balancing outreach with confidentiality, and the need to apply proven demand-reduction tactics, continued into the next half of the session. Discussions revolved around science-based recommendations for outreach related to complex or controversial topics, and tools were shared to apply when communicating with target audiences. The presentation transitioned into collaborative competence, focusing on practices that support interdisciplinary collaboration with examples related to the illegal turtle trade.

At the conclusion of the session, participants weighed in on communication gaps related to the illegal turtle trade and identified a number of shared needs including plain language explanations of regulations; outreach themes for different stakeholder groups that reflect their needs, interests, and values; stories and imagery that help bring the issue to life; clear pre-determined boundaries when discussing the issue with the public; actionable information on how the public can help; and consistent messaging about the issue across agencies. To address these issues, workshop organizers are working on shared messaging documents and best practices for communications.

Additional Information/Resources:

- Using crime script analysis to understand wildlife poaching in Vietnam: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-020-01498-3>
- Identifying novel interventions to disrupt nature crime supply chains: <https://www.canva.com/design/DAEyb9QC8YQ/GsarSfhgERLZqEX3I4IH0Q/edit>
- ASU Center for Problem-Oriented Policing <https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/resources>
- Using situational crime prevention to address illegal wildlife trade: a toolkit: https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/using_scp_to_address_illegal_wildlife_trade_toolkit.pdf
- COMPASS Science Communication, Inc. (2017). The Message Box Workbook: <https://www.COMPASSscicomm.org/>

Confiscation and Repatriation Summary:

The Confiscation and Repatriation workshop focused on how agencies can most effectively respond when native turtles are being confiscated, particularly when the source of the turtles is unknown and there is no affiliated case. The session kicked off with a poll on how prepared agencies were to accept varying levels of confiscations in a scenario similar to one experienced by New York state in 2018. Eighty percent of the 78 poll respondents did not have a plan for confiscating 50 turtles, and forty percent of respondents expressed that confiscations involving more than 100 turtles would be a challenge for the agency to address.

Presentations focused on providing an example of a confiscation event, considerations for biosecurity for turtle and human safety and developing a network for confiscations. Participants used breakout rooms to discuss confiscation and repatriation needs.

Key Takeaways:

- Additional wildlife inspectors at mail facilities are needed to intercept illegal shipments.
- Approved confiscation plans would be valuable to assist in the process of turtle confiscation. Components of plans were suggested and include contact list for handlers, licensed vets, biologists to identify species, people for transport, a list of supplies, and standard seizure investigation information from law enforcement (such as origin of animals, chain of custody, etc.).
- Identification of a network of facilities that can handle large confiscations is a priority (lists of wildlife rehabilitators, local zoos and aquariums, universities and nature centers that can house confiscated turtles).
- Assess cost estimates for long term housing and care of confiscated turtles
- Long-term funding is needed for care of confiscated turtles at facilities, including staff, expenses, equipment and supplies
- In order to even consider repatriation, funding for and the implementation of genetic and disease screening is a necessity.

To assist with these needs, one workshop outcome is to develop a template confiscation plan that will address several of these points. However, there is the immediate need to find facilities that can take the turtles and for funding to pay for that care.

In addition, the need for better data to understand the scope of the issue was consistently brought up. It is speculated that the majority of illegally trafficked turtles are not detected. To assist with these problems, the following recommendations were provided:

- Funding for additional law enforcement capacity and training, including an emphasis on identification, location assignment of confiscated specimens and determination if turtles are wild vs captive sourced
- Increased communication between state and federal law enforcement

- Standardized reporting in the Law Enforcement Management Information System (LEMIS) and/or a central reporting database for confiscated turtles; an alternative would be multiple databases that allow for standard reporting and cross analysis, and,
- annual reports from states and federal agencies that go to one entity to compile and report.

At this time, there are no dedicated funding sources for the care of confiscated animals or resources needed to support repatriation (disease testing, genetic testing, post release monitoring). States, Provinces, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have to determine how to cover costs within existing budgets or pursue non-traditional means of funding (taxes, donations) or grants which could impact the ability to confiscate and enforce laws and to maximize conservation for our native U.S. turtles.

Potential sources of funding for long term care or to support repatriation efforts mentioned include:

- NGOs or private foundations and donors
- Non-game tax deductible donation through state hunting and fishing license
- Conservation license plates and conservation stamps
- USPS, UPS, and/or FedEx donations or fees to cover confiscation of illegal shipments
- Tax or fee on legal turtle owners (through pet trade) that would go towards expenses associated with the illegal trade
- Partnering with animal welfare organizations on animal welfare issues relating to turtles
- Creative sentencing that direct conviction fees towards care or conservation
- Pooled funds from all states to provide an emergency funding source for confiscation needs
- Recovering America's Wildlife Act (HR2773)
 - If passed, states could all provide a portion of funding to support a national confiscation care facility.
 - This funding could be consistent and would allow for long term planning.

Conclusions:

The illegal trade in native turtles and tortoises is a widespread issue in the United States and Canada that will require multistate coordination and collaboration across jurisdictions and disciplines to address.

Funding, capacity shortages, and lack of consistent data continue to be the overarching barriers in addressing the illegal trade in turtles. Recovering America's Wildlife Act would support state-based turtle conservation, including conservation education programs, law enforcement staff and training, research, and supporting repatriation of confiscated animals. However, a federal funding source would also be needed to concurrently increase federal engagement and collaborative efforts. In addition, there is a need to direct fines and restitution from sentencing to care or conservation and to find longer term sources of funding.

Next Steps:

1. Develop an Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) resolution supporting conservation priorities, such as the need to address resources needed to confiscate turtles and offering model legislative/ regulatory language for states' voluntary consideration in coordination with the AFWA Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Committee, Law Enforcement Committee, and Legal Committee.
2. Finalize a communication guide that outlines key communication topic areas and other shared language to discuss the illegal trade both with internal and external stakeholders in coordination with the Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT) Human Dimensions Working Group.
3. Host a multi-stakeholder strategic planning workshop to develop a shared, comprehensive understanding of, and implementation plan for, the illegal trade in North American tortoises and freshwater turtles in the global marketplace. This workshop will be held in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC), through their Turtle Networking Team's Working Group, the Collaborative to Combat the Illegal Trade in Turtles (CCITT).
4. Develop a training workshop and identify resources to assist law enforcement with confiscations.
5. Develop a template confiscation plan that includes protocols for handling, care and biosecurity measures, recommended data to record, suggested contact lists, and other information outlined in the Confiscation and Repatriation workshop.
6. Develop a list of facilities that can house large confiscations of turtles which includes wildlife rehabilitators, local zoos and aquariums, and nature centers.
7. Continue to look for long-term funding opportunities to address needs, including through the proposed Recovering America's Wildlife Act.
8. Continue to hold regional PARC illegal turtle trade workshops to bring additional law enforcement and biologists together to learn about and form stronger partnerships to tackle this issue.
9. Encourage States/Provinces to hold their own illegal turtle trade workshops to bring in additional local stakeholders (that were not present for the regional PARC workshops) to learn about and form stronger partnerships to tackle this issue.

Appendix I

Northeast Illegal Turtle Trade Workshop: Enhancing Partnerships to Combat Poaching and Trafficking

This two-day, no-cost, virtual workshop is open to Provincial, State, Tribal, and Federal law enforcement officers and biologists. This workshop will provide time and space for law enforcement officers and biologists to share information, network, develop new intra- and inter-agency partnerships, and develop strategies for addressing the illegal collection, trafficking, and confiscation of native terrestrial and freshwater turtles in the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada.

Thursday, February 17, 2022

Symposia: Introduction and Overview	
9:00-9:05 ET	Logistics Noelle Rayman-Metcalf, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
9:05-9:10 ET	Introductions/Welcome Ryan Noel, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
9:10-9:25 ET	Summary of the Illegal Turtle Trade in the United States: What We Know and What We Don't Know Scott Buchanan, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management
9:25-9:55 ET	Overview of the Turtle and Tortoise Trade in Canada Richard Kott, National Intelligence Manager, Environment and Climate Change Canada Navdeep Dulay, Intelligence Analyst, Environment and Climate Change Canada
9:55-10:40 ET	How to Catch a Poacher (U.S.) Mark Cagle, Poacher Strike Force
10:40-10:50 ET	Break

10:50-11:15 ET	International Perspective on Illegal Turtle Trade Ryan Bessey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
11:15-11:40 ET	Challenges with Confiscations at Ports/Mail Facilities Joe Rousseau, Wildlife Inspector
11:40-12:00 ET	Effectively Prosecuting Turtle Cases Ryan Connors, U.S. Department of Justice
12:00-12:15 ET	Q&A Session
12:15-12:20 ET	Logistics for Individual Workshops Noelle Rayman-Metcalf, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Workshop #1: Legal Considerations for Turtle Conservation	
<p>Lane Kisonak, Chief Legal Officer, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Gordon Batcheller, Legal Strategies Advisory Council, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies</p>	
Duration: 1:00-4:00 ET	
Description: This session will be an overview of the current status of laws and regulations to conserve turtles; an assessment of legal gaps and vacancies; and a discussion on crafting model legislation to improve the conservation of turtles.	
Expected Outcome(s): Develop a template/concept of a resolution to strengthen states laws for the conservation of turtles.	

Friday, February 18, 2022

Workshop #2: Strategies for Preventing and Communicating About Crimes Against Turtles

Bridget Macdonald, Public Affairs Specialist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, North Atlantic-Appalachian Region

Meredith Gore, Associate Professor, Department of Geographical Studies, University of Maryland

Duration: 8:30-11:30 ET

Description: During this session, participants will become familiar with tools and strategies from the field of conservation criminology they can use to identify and address guardianship and enforcement gaps that turtle poachers exploit, as well as best practices for communication and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Expected Outcome(s): Learn to apply tools from conservation criminology and communications that support situational crime prevention, outreach planning, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Leave with these and other resources that you use to address needs in your jurisdiction.

Workshop #3: Addressing State and Federal Confiscation Needs and Priorities

Dave Collins, Director of North American Turtle Conservation, Turtle Survival Alliance and AZA American Turtle SAFE Program Leader

Julie Slacum, Supervisory Endangered Species Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Chesapeake Bay Field Office

Duration: 12:30-3:30 ET

Description: The goal of this session is to identify and address state and federal needs and challenges associated with turtle confiscations. Outcomes include identification of key elements needed to develop a template state confiscation plan and addressing challenges and long-term funding needs by building a network of support.

Expected Outcome(s): Develop key elements/template to include in a state confiscation plan. Determine key elements to expanding a network of support to effectively address the challenges and needs associated with confiscations.

Closing Remarks	
3:30-3:45 ET	<p>Workshop Wrap-up/Next Steps</p> <p>Noelle Rayman-Metcalf, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service</p> <p>Lane Kisonak, Chief Legal Officer, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies</p>

The Workshop is Held in Partnership With:

