

Oh, snap! Time to keep the trappers at bay

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by Cameron Smith

Right across Ontario, people can trap and kill snapping turtles. The daily bag limit is two. The number that can be possessed at any one time is five.

In Northern Ontario it's open season all year long. South of the French River, snappers can be trapped only in the two months between July 15 and Sept. 15, except for two areas, one north of Madoc and one north of Camden East, where there is a year-long open season.

Every other species of turtle is protected, either because it is a species at risk or, in the case of painted turtles, because they are protected by a special regulation.

So why are snapping turtles deemed more expendable? It has been proved time and again that, contrary to occasional rumours, they are not a threat to populations of waterfowl or game fish.

Aquatic plants account for 65 per cent of their diet. They also eat carrion, frogs, molluscs, crustaceans, and small, bottom-feeding, slow-swimming fish. There are rare instances where they've been known to kill ducklings, but never to a degree that should remotely concern duck hunters.

It's no justification, therefore, to say trapping is needed to protect game for fishers and hunters — and Ontario's regulations don't try to make that case. They refer only to eating turtles. "You may not remove the upper shell from any snapping turtle," say the regulations, "until immediately before it is prepared for consumption."

But these days a person would be crazy to eat turtle meat. Snappers have a high tolerance for toxins, and can accumulate much higher levels of persistent pollutants than fish. For instance, they've been found with 10,000 parts per million of PCBs in their fat, brains, and testes. Levels this high in a human would be immediately fatal.

With nothing to justify trapping, it becomes all the more important to look at the consequences — and this is where alarm bells should be ringing.

There is no reliable information on snapping turtle populations across the province. What is known is that they are in serious decline in certain locations.

For instance, where I live in the Thousand Islands area, snapping turtles are disappearing, even though, according to Chris Bellemore, outreach coordinator for St. Lawrence Islands National Park, "This is one of the most important and productive turtle areas in all of Canada."

Snappers are disappearing faster than they can replace themselves, he says, mainly because of road kill. It pushes their overall mortality rate to more than 2 per cent a year. Yet, according to a paper by Susanne Kynast at www.tortoisetrust.org, the recruitment rate for snappers (the rate at which juveniles reach breeding age) is only 1 to 1.8 per cent a year in the best of times.

Recruitment is low, because predators destroy so many eggs and baby turtles. Only one egg in 1,445 eventually becomes an adult turtle, she says. Of eggs that hatch, only one hatchling in 133 survives to become an adult.

Once an adult, however, snappers have long lives — if they aren't run over by a car. They reach sexual maturity at 12 to 19 years of age, and can live to age 100.

These are magnificent animals. They've been around for 215 million years, arriving long before the dinosaurs. They've survived ice ages, and even the great extinction that killed the dinosaurs. They are non-aggressive — unless cornered or attacked — and except for humans, they have no natural enemies.

It makes no sense that trapping is allowed. It should be prohibited, as it is with other turtle species, and an assessment should be launched to find out how they are faring across the province.

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