

FEATURE-Texas turtles ending up in China soup pots

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By Anna Driver

HOUSTON, June 23 (Reuters) - Growing up in East Texas, Dian Avriett loved to watch the turtles sunning on the banks of local rivers and lakes. But now she says it's rare to see them on those same waterways, and the reason is clear -- China's taste for Texas turtle meat.

Hundreds of thousands have been sold to dealers who ship the animals to Asia where the meat is considered a delicacy with health benefits. Some also fetch high prices around the world as pets.

"In Texas, anyone with a \$50 dollar non-game permit can take as many (turtles) as they want," said Avriett, who chairs the Piney Woods group of the Sierra Club.

Global turtle populations are at risk, but conservationists said the problem is growing acute in Texas where there are no limits on the collection of unprotected varieties.

An average of 94,442 turtles per year are taken by dealers, mostly for export from the state, according to figures from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD).

Data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service obtained under a Freedom of Information Act request showed more than 267,000 wild turtles were exported to Hong Kong from Dallas from 2002 to 2005, said Chris Jones, an environmental attorney who has lobbied for turtle protections.

Although there are no state-wide statistics showing declines in Texas turtle population, Jones said abundant anecdotal evidence exists. For example in one section of the Rio Grande river that had been a trap site, an adult turtle has not been seen in 10 years.

"They are taking them so fast the scientists can't study them," Jones said.

Now some varieties including the Texas river cooter could have some protection because the TPWD commissioners on May 24 approved a measure to prohibit the collection of wild turtles on public land.

But under that regulation, which is not yet on the books as law, collectors may harvest three varieties of turtles on private land; the red-eared slider, the common snapping turtle and five types of soft-shell turtles.

SLOW GOING

Turtles need protection from overharvesting because they are slow to mature and their young have a high mortality rate, said Lee Fitzgerald, an associate professor of herpetology at Texas A&M University who has published research on the Texas turtle trade.

"Their population can't take the removal of adults," said Fitzgerald. "If it continues, the population will collapse."

For example he said it takes a female box turtle 15 years to reach sexual maturity. Once at that

stage she lays four or five eggs, and most of the hatchlings will not survive.

But Bob Popplewell, the state's largest exporter of live turtles to Asia, disagrees. He said there are plenty of turtles in Texas. And many are a nuisance to ranchers who say the turtles eat fish eggs and birds, and overcrowd their lakes and ponds, he said.

"People tell me they don't want one nasty, stinking turtle in their lake," said Popplewell, who is known as "Bayou Bob." "I've seen a decent-sized snapper pull down a full-grown goose. They are trained, stealthy predators."

Popplewell, who said he has received threats from animal rights activists, works with a network of hundreds of trappers across Texas who can earn up to \$20 an hour for their work.

Once snared in net traps, the turtles are shipped to Asia by plane, he said.

The parties are divided over whether the state's proposed limits will protect the turtle population. Popplewell said 99 percent of the turtles his people harvest come from private lakes, so the changes will have little effect on his business.

Texas A&M's Fitzgerald described the protection measure as a step in the right direction, while conservationists say there should be a total ban on commercial turtle collection.