

Box Turtle Partnership of Texas

DFW Herpetological Society (www.dfwherp.org)

Cricket Frog Press (www.cricket-frog.com)

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Carl's Creepy Crawlies (www.carlscreepycrawlies.com)

Gulf Coast Turtle & Tortoise Society (www.gctts.org)

Austin Reptile Service (www.austinreptileservice.net)

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Illumination Studios (www.illuminationstudios.com)

Austin Herpetological Society (<http://www.austinherpsociety.org>)

Questions & Answers About Box Turtles

What is the problem?

Box turtles, a familiar and charming part of Texas' wildlife, seem to be declining. Commercial collection for the pet trade may substantially harm box turtle populations. Over the past three years, data collected by Texas Parks & Wildlife show that 1,273 three-toed box turtles have been sold in Texas, along with 801 desert box turtles and 4,980 ornate box turtles. There is relatively little commercial trade in captive-bred box turtles, so this means most of these turtles were taken from the wild.



Once collected for the pet trade, box turtles are often kept in filthy conditions, stacked on top of one another and often without access to food and water. It is estimated that up to half the box turtles die before being sold, and box turtles sold from pet stores and flea markets often suffer from malnutrition, dehydration, and infection. It is probably safe to say that being collected for the pet trade is a death sentence for most box turtles.

Why are box turtles so important?

To some of us, box turtles are important just because they *are*, because they have such a fascinating body plan or such charming faces, or such interesting behavior. But not everyone is an out-and-out box turtle fan, and these animals still have something to offer to those who simply enjoy the outdoors. Imagine taking a walk in an immense field of turf grass and a few scattered trees. The experience would lack richness and interest. Compared to a typical forest or prairie, the landscape would seem barren and uninteresting. Each plant and each animal adds richness to the world of nature. Although by itself it might seem a small thing, each plant or animal that is lost takes away some of the detail and texture of the natural places we enjoy.

On top of that, each plant and animal has a role to play in nature. When we remove one, others are affected, sometimes in unpredictable ways.

Turtles have been here in something like their present form since before the age of dinosaurs. An individual box turtle may outlive you or me. It seems terribly shortsighted of us to waste such remarkable animals, turning them into disposable pets just for a few dollars.

Isn't habitat protection more important?

Our cities are sprawling out into the countryside, turning more and more acres into houses, stores, and streets. We need to preserve some of the places where box turtles live, keeping the natural plant and animal communities intact. While protecting habitat is extremely important, we cannot ignore the harm that commercial collection does. Box turtle populations can decline if overcollection occurs, even when those populations live in undeveloped habitat. Data from Louisiana showed significantly reduced turtles from a collected area compared with similar areas that were protected from collection.

Why does collecting them do so much harm?

Their reproductive strategy makes each individual adult very important. A box turtle may have to survive for upwards of 10 years before it can mate and lay eggs. Females lay relatively few eggs, and many of the nests are dug up and eaten by raccoons and other predators. The babies are very vulnerable for their first few years and are often eaten. And so, the box turtle produces very few babies that survive to adulthood. Why haven't they died off? Because over a long lifespan they have many chances to enter the reproductive lottery. Box turtles may often live for 50 years and sometimes much more. A female box turtle may be able to lay many clutches of eggs over her lifetime. Even though most of the eggs are eaten and most of the babies die, she may have produced a very small number of adults by the time her life is over.



What if our female box turtle is run over on the road, or picked up by a collector? She is now out of the reproductive lottery, and that may take away 40 or more years of reproductive activity. Each turtle that is taken out of the population removes a significant part of the reproductive potential of that population – much more significant than removing a snake or a lizard, for example. When the population is thinned beyond a certain point, adults are unlikely to find each other for mating. This means not enough babies can be produced for the population to survive. The remaining adults may be seen for quite a long time (since they live long lives). That leads people to think that box turtles are still around and maybe doing OK, when the population is reproductively dead. When those individuals are gone, there will be no more.

What are we doing about it?

The Box Turtle Partnership of Texas is asking that the commercial collecting, buying, and selling of wild box turtles in Texas be stopped. Several years ago, Louisiana passed a law prohibiting the commercial collection of box turtles. We need a similar law or regulation.

Currently, Texas requires dealers to have a permit to buy and sell box turtles, but no limit is placed on the numbers that can be taken. We must do more than that. Because box turtles can be harmed so much by the removal of a limited number of adults, we must stop the commercial harvest of wild box turtles if we are to protect this part of our Texas heritage.

We encourage people to write letters to Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept. and to their Texas legislator. We think personal letters are best, putting into your words a statement that box turtles are in trouble and that they are worth saving. The letter can quote any of the information in this document, and you can ask them to prohibit the commercial collection and sale of box turtles. Write to:

Chairman, Texas Parks & Wildlife Commission	Mr. Robert Cook, Executive Director
4200 Smith School Road	Texas Parks & Wildlife Department
Austin, Texas 78744	4200 Smith School Road
http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/	Austin, Texas 78744

A law prohibiting commercial collection of wild box turtles would require action from the Texas legislature. You can write your Texas Representative or Senator, or send him or her a copy of the letter you write to Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. You can find your state legislator at:

<http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/>

When you write your letter, would you please send us a copy? That is one way for us to keep track of our efforts. Please send copies to: BTPT, c/o DFW Herpetological Society, P.O. Box 540892, Grand Prairie, TX 75054-0892.

While personal letters are more effective, it is also helpful to sign our petition at the Petition Online website: <http://www.petitiononline.com/btpt/petition.html>

Do we want to ban all box turtle keeping?

No. We want to discourage collecting from the wild, but we recognize that an individual may pick up and care for a box turtle without doing much harm. This kind of personal experience often shapes a love of wildlife and can provide a spark for a hobby or even a career in biology. We think a person ought to be able to keep up to two individuals per box turtle species without a permit.

We also think that a permitting process should allow for the keeping of more than two box turtles, the captive breeding of box turtles and sale of juvenile captive-bred box turtles with a carapace length under four inches (for educational or scientific purposes in accordance with the law).

Why not wait for studies to be complete?

We believe that decisions about wildlife conservation should be grounded in scientific knowledge. However, not much is known about the current status of box turtle populations in Texas. The studies that would give us more information are mostly not being done and there is little funding to support such studies. If we wait for the research to prove that commercial collecting is not sustainable, it may be too late. Box turtle populations could be seriously thinned by then, and they may not be able to recover once their populations drop too far. The scientific evidence that we *do* have about how box turtles live points solidly and clearly to the need for these animals to be protected.