

Commission Files Charges Following Investigation of Illegal Reptile Sales

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Harrisburg, PA – An 18-month investigation by the Fish and Boat Commission's Bureau of Law Enforcement has resulted in a dozen individuals from three states being charged with illegally selling and possessing native reptiles.

"It is alleged that the defendants offered to sell reptiles unlawfully either via advertisements on the internet or at trade shows," said Jeff Bridi, the commission's assistant director of law enforcement. "Further investigation uncovered evidence of unlawful importation and possession as well as other criminal offenses."

Reptiles which are native to Pennsylvania include wood turtles, eastern box turtles, spotted turtles, snapping turtles, timber rattlesnakes and copperheads.

As part of the investigation, PFBC officers posed as reptile collectors and made contact with many of the subjects through e-mail and in some cases directly at trade shows. After purchasing the reptiles, officers served search warrants at a number of locations to obtain additional evidence. The defendants are from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.

Populations of many native species of reptiles and amphibians are in decline due to a variety of factors including habitat loss. "The unlawful collection of animals from the wild can be another stressor on populations and for this reason the sale of most native reptiles and amphibians is prohibited under regulations enforced by the Commission," Bridi said. "Revised regulations which became effective in 2007 further limited the taking, possession and importation of species of reptiles and amphibians found in the state and made their sale unlawful."

The Commission charges approximately 18 individuals each year with the illegal importation, sale or possession of native reptiles and amphibians. This was the largest undercover operation conducted by the Commission and resulted in the highest number of individuals being charged at one time. Pennsylvania residents charged following the investigation include Wesley Allison and Nicholas Aponti of Schwenksville, Montgomery County; Paul Cooper of Lititz, Lancaster County; Debra Cross of Atglen, Chester County; Michael Percival of Throop, Lackawanna County; Kevin Stanford of Dunmore, Lackawanna County; and Peter Terefenko of Reading, Berks County. Those charged from out of state include Michael Brooks of Holbrook, N.Y.; Thomas Caucci of Mays Landing, N.J.; Frederick Lee of Berkeley Heights, N.J.; Justin Munsterman of Fishkill, N.Y.; and Darren Paolini of Newburgh, N.Y. If convicted, the defendants face fines of \$50 to \$500 per offense. Bridi added that the investigation is still ongoing and that other individuals may still face charges.

The Commission received cooperation and assistance during this wide-ranging investigation from officers of other conservation agencies including the N.J. Division of Fish and Wildlife; the N.Y. Department of Environmental Conservation, Bureau of Environmental Criminal Investigation; and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Pennsylvania State Police provided invaluable support during aspects of the investigation as well.

For further information on Pennsylvania's native reptiles and amphibians as well as a summary of the laws and regulations pertaining to them please visit the Commission's website at www.fishandboat.com<<http://www.fishandboat.com>>. The mission of the Fish and Boat Commission is

to protect, conserve, and enhance the Commonwealth's aquatic resources and provide fishing and boating opportunities.