



News from [New York State Department of Environmental Conservation](http://www.dec.ny.gov)

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Black Market Animal Trade Busted

DEC's In-Depth Undercover Investigation Nets 18 Arrests

ALBANY, NY (03/19/2009; 1019)(readMedia)-- An extensive undercover investigation into the poaching, smuggling and illegal sale of protected reptiles and amphibians by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation has led to charges against 18 individuals for 14 felonies, 11 misdemeanors and dozens of violations, DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis announced today.

The investigation, dubbed "Operation Shellshock," uncovered a lucrative, international black market for poaching and selling native, protected New York species - turtles, rattlesnakes and salamanders - through the Internet and at herpetological shows, Commissioner Grannis said. Investigators found thousands of New York turtles being laundered through "middlemen" in other states, then getting shipped overseas for meat and other uses. More than 2,400 individual turtles, snakes and salamanders were involved in the documented crimes, with DEC currently holding nearly 400 live animals in evidence.

The undercover investigation began in 2007, coordinated through DEC's Bureau of Environmental Crimes Investigation (BECI). Investigators spent hundreds of hours afield and at shows with reptile poachers and illegal collectors. They built cases from the ground up through initial contact with violators online, at shows, and in the field.

Through the investigation, New York DEC investigators worked closely with officials from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Florida, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Service, the New York State Attorney General's Office, Environment Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Some of these agencies have filed separate but related charges (details below).

"Our investigators began this operation with a simple question: Is there a commercial threat to our critical wildlife species? What they found was alarming," Commissioner Pete Grannis said. "A very lucrative illegal market for these creatures does exist, fostered by a strong, clandestine culture of people who want to exploit wildlife for illegal profit. I'm proud of the success of our officers. Their work sends a strong message that the buying and selling of New York's native species will not be tolerated."

"Operation Shellshock is one of the largest, most extensive undercover operations DEC has ever undertaken," said Henry Hamilton, DEC Assistant Commissioner for Public Protection. "It stands out for its magnitude and impact, and it hopefully will be a springboard for positive change on all fronts involving ecologically significant species."

"Illegal trafficking of turtles, snakes and other animals is a serious matter precisely because such activities can produce long-term, detrimental effects to the eco-system. No one wants to see populations of vital species put at risk for short-term profits," said Kathleen M. Mehlretter, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Western District of New York. "Operation Shellshock should serve not only as a deterrent but also should raise public awareness about the need to protect wildlife."

"Environment Canada believes in ensuring that companies and individuals comply with the conservation goals of environmental and wildlife protection acts and regulations," said Albin Tremblay, Chief Enforcement Officer with Environment Canada. "The department carries out its enforcement work in cooperation with other federal, provincial and territorial governments and with international organizations. Operation Shellshock is a good example of how working together can produce positive results."

"Reptiles and amphibians are important environmental indicators that tell us much about the health of the planet. As such, they must be protected -- not exploited," said David Critchlow, Provincial Enforcement Specialist of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. "Through the cooperative work of Canadian and American agencies, we hopefully have not only put a dent in the black market for these animals but also sent a strong message to legitimate collectors and the general public."

The Investigation

Investigators found New York's timber rattlesnakes and wood turtles being shipped out of state and out of the country to support high-end collectors. They found thousands of snapping turtles laundered through a Louisiana turtle farm, then shipped illegally to China. They found poachers stealing turtle eggs as soon as they were laid. And they successfully traded with a smuggler from Canada to recover a population of endangered Massasauga rattlesnakes - nabbing him in a Niagara Falls parking lot with a van stuffed with 33 rattlesnakes in hidden compartments.

Other snakes confiscated during the operation were timber rattlesnakes, copperheads and eastern hognose snakes. The types of turtles confiscated included snapping turtles, Blandings turtles, box turtles, North American wood turtles and two Yellow Spotted Amazon River turtles, which are federally protected as an endangered species.

Charges Beyond New York

In addition, as a result of Operation Shellshock, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of New York are pursuing Federal Lacey Act charges against a Maryland meat processor for the knowing purchase of illegally trapped New York State snapping turtles, and against a Louisiana turtle farm operator for the knowing purchase of illegally taken New York State snapping turtle hatchlings and the export of such hatchlings to China.

Pennsylvania authorities have charged six individuals and are continuing their investigation. Canadian officials so far have charged one individual.

New York prohibits the illegal commercialization of wildlife; a law enacted in 2006 gives protection to all reptiles and amphibians. The state also bans unlawful possession of protected species. A list of individuals cited and the charges filed by New York officials is available.

Commissioner Grannis re-constituted BECI in 2007. The investigation was led by Capt. Michael Van Durme, Lt. Richard Thomas and Investigator Daniel Sullivan. DEC reptile and amphibian specialist Alvin Breisch and wildlife educator Tom Hudak of Livingston County provided valuable support in numerous phases of the operation, as did DEC Environmental Conservation Officers throughout the state.