

East Texas Aquatic Work Group Meeting Summary

July 9, 2020

View the meeting online. The password is Alligator1. The recording missed the update from the Sabine River Authority and starts with Jason Watson from LNVA talking about using ArcGIS online to share survey data.

Updates:

Sabine River Authority

Bill Kirby shared the mussel surveys have been delayed due to rain and high river levels. Alligator snapping turtle reports are coming in thanks to the signs that have been distributed across the Sabine basin.

Lower Neches Valley Authority

Jason Watson shared his ArcGIS online database to help river authorities and other stakeholders keep track of and coordinate research efforts. He demonstrated a report of an alligator snapping turtle in the LNVA canal. If you would like access to the database or more information, please [contact Jason via email](#).

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

Research

Dr. Paul Crump from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) introduced Dr. Chris Schalk of Stephen F. Austin State University and his work on the Alligator Snapping Turtle.

Dr. Schalk explained he and his grad students are revisiting the sites from the R. Craig Rudolph study of 1998-2001 and filling in gaps in the county records. Graduate student, David Rosenbaum, has already visited 10 sites from the previous study and captured 75 alligator snapping turtles. This is close to double the number of turtles captured during the entire Rudolph study. The increase in captures may be due to putting the bait for the traps in a PVC pipe that can withstand the jaws of the alligator snapping turtle better than the aluminum cans used in the original study. The current study is also collecting blood samples and tissue samples to look at mercury concentrations and allow for future work to look at turtle populations and genetics. The work recently expanded to test the use of environmental DNA as a survey method. If you would like more information about the study, please [contact Dr. Schalk](#).

TPWD Urban wildlife biologist Kelly Norrid is looking to start more trapping in the 800 miles of bayou around Houston to see if there is more habitat like what was found in Buffalo Bayou. Norrid also reported five adult alligator snapping turtles between 40 and 50 pounds were found at the confluence of Spring Creek and the West Fork of the San Jacinto River in Northeast Harris County. No apparent trauma from fishing lines or bullet holes were found.

If you do find an alligator snapping turtle, Norrid asks you to text a photo and the location to TPWD at 281-302-8033, and [see the TPWD website](#) for more information.

Dr. Crump mentioned that [Andrew Brinker](#) and Carl Franklin are doing mark recapture studies in the upper Trinity.

Dr. Crump concluded with sharing his interest in repatriating some 30 alligator snapping turtles from a federal Louisiana hatchery back to their native waters in Texas. Tracking devices could be attached to turtles as part of a telemetry study. The turtles were part of a criminal investigation that has concluded.

Legal Questions

Regarding the legal ramifications of encounters with alligator snapping turtles Norrid and Stormy King, the Assistant Commander of Wildlife Enforcement at TPWD provided the following:

What should you do if you catch an alligator snapping turtle on fishing gear?

- If it is alive, safely remove the hook, if possible, and return it to the water. Report the sighting to the hotline number 281-302-8033.
- If it is dead and the cause of death is known to be drowning by fishing line, report the incident to the hotline as a sighting with pictures. Do not keep any piece of the turtle. It is illegal to own, in whole or in part, a protected species.

What should you do if you catch an alligator snapping turtle while engaged in some other legal activity, such as the maintenance or operation of equipment or infrastructure by a river authority?

- If is alive, safely move the turtle back to the area it was caught and then report the sighting.
- If it is dead, TPWD has no provisions addressing incidental take. Any criminal prosecution would require a culpable mental state. The minimum mental state required would be criminal negligence, which, in simple terms, would require that the actor is aware of a substantial or unjustifiable risk that the circumstances occur. In short, TPWD would have difficulty prosecuting anyone for an “accident” related to this sort of thing. Furthermore, appropriate discretion is always employed when assessing the circumstances of any violation. That being said, if the person should retain possession of any of these species, they would be subject to prosecution.

Texas Comptroller’s office

Lauren Borland gave an overview of the call for proposals for alligator snapping turtle research the Comptroller’s office plans to release, as stated in [this document](#), which was distributed to this work group in June. The research objectives are to: characterize demographics of *M. temminckii* population in Texas; assess the genetic structure of *M. temminckii* in Texas; and serve as a basis for long-term population monitoring efforts and provide field training for stakeholders. [Contact Lauren](#) if you have any additional considerations for the research. All comments will need to be received by Friday, July 17, 2020 to be considered during the development of the call for proposals.

Discussion items:

Are there any research ideas not included in the research priorities that should be considered?

Dr. Schalk brought up the eDNA work his lab is starting.

Is anyone planning surveys or research the Comptroller should know about before issuing a call for proposals based on these research priorities? *None that were not previously mentioned.*

Are these meetings helpful? *Yes.*