



NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

The world's cutest reptile is in danger

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Imagine being snatched from your home and held in a small, dark box that's too hot, too cold, too wet and too dry by turns, with food that's wrong for you and makes you sick.

This is the life of a bog turtle stolen from the wild to be sold illegally to people who supposedly "love" them.

The largest bog turtle ever measured was just 4.5 inches long. Native only to the eastern United States, they are the smallest turtles in the U.S., surely the cutest, and one of the most rare.

And they are in trouble.

That's because bog turtles need very specific living conditions, in a very delicate balance.

Many kinds of human activity — such as draining or damaging wetlands, spreading weedkiller and pesticides, mowing or fertilizing wetland vegetation, building roads and houses, and even grazing farm animals — can be deadly as far as half a mile or more away from the turtles' territory.

Invasive plants like knotweed and purple loosestrife can dry out large areas of bog turtles' home turf. Large, compact clumps of the plants make it impossible for the turtles to move around — to feed, to find mates, to nest and raise young, and to overwinter.

At the other extreme, climate changes can flood them out, turning the boggy ground they need into standing or running water at critical times in their life cycle.

We can be grateful that small, healthy colonies of native bog turtles survive in the Brodhead watershed. They are protected by law, by surveillance, and by law enforcement patrols.

You can help. Never take any creature from the wild. Support local efforts to keep wetlands safe from development and disturbance. If you own land that may have bog turtle habitat, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service can recommend ways to protect it.

And never buy a bog turtle from a dealer or anyone else. Even if the sale were legal, it still wouldn't be right.

For information, go to U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/pafo/>

