Imagine spending your entire life in solitary confinement, unable to move farther than a few feet in any direction, and never able to see another member of your own species.

This was the bleak existence for a “pet” snapping turtle named Shelly who lived in a fish tank in Tilton, NH for 24 years.

Imagining what that turtle’s life must be like kept members of the NH Animal Rights League, and an outraged woman named Hillarie Goldstein, awake at night.

How Could This Happen?

Shelly the turtle was taken from the wild as a hatchling by well-meaning but uninformed people who saw her attempting to cross a busy downtown intersection. Although their intentions were good, they made the mistake of keeping the turtle far beyond the time when she could have been safely released back into the wild.

In New Hampshire, it is perfectly legal to take a snapping turtle out of the wild and make it a pet. In fact, you are allowed to take up to two.

This surprises most people, who reasonably assume that taking an animal out of the wild and keeping it captive is illegal.

Turns out there are some animals you can take from the wild, and some that you can’t. Having exclusive control over all captive and noncaptive wildlife in the state, The NH Fish and Game Department makes the rules.
Wildlife Possession Laws in New Hampshire

Below is a glimpse into laws surrounding possession of wildlife species occurring in New Hampshire. See the NH Fish and Game Department for a complete list.

Species That Cannot Be Possessed

Any animal classified as threatened, endangered, or of special concern at the federal or state level (e.g., Blanding’s turtles and Eastern hognose snakes).

*Note:* Although the average person cannot possess these animals, exhibitors can with a permit.

Species That Can Be Possessed

- Up to 5 of 13 different listed amphibians, such as spring peepers and red-spotted newts.
- Up to 2 of 9 different listed reptiles, such as snapping turtles and ring-necked snakes.

*Note:* To protect breeding females, only snapping turtles of a certain size can be taken, and no indigenous turtle can be taken from May 15 to July 15.

In spite of laws allowing limited possession of these species, the NH Fish & Game Department encourages people to “leave wildlife wild,” adding that, “Populations of some species, especially turtles, can be adversely affected by the removal of a small number of individuals.”

Life in a Tank

The people who took Shelly home became more and more attached to her as time passed. She also became somewhat of an “attraction,” as she was on display in the lobby of the family’s used auto parts store.

As Shelly grew, successively larger fish tanks were purchased each time she outgrew one. But no matter how big the tank, her living conditions bore no resemblance to a natural snapping turtle habitat.

For one, snapping turtles like to be hidden and will dig themselves into the mud. They can also stay out of water for up to two weeks and move surprisingly fast on land.
Example of a snapping turtle’s natural habitat

Someone Speaks Up

In 2016, Hillarie Goldstein visited the auto parts shop where Shelly was kept and was shocked by her captivity and living conditions. She expressed her concern to the owners, but they believed that they were taking good care of the turtle.

Hillarie also contacted the NH Fish and Game Department, assuming that what she had witnessed must be breaking some law or rule. Cursory welfare checks were performed, and it was determined that the turtle was not being mistreated.

But Hillarie was not deterred. She wrote a letter to the editor and got press coverage in local newspapers. Despite the publicity, nothing changed for Shelly the turtle.

Press Coverage of Shelly the Turtle

- Giant snapping turtle in Tilton draws concern (Laconia Daily Sun, July 2016)
- Local business owner refutes accusations of animal cruelty (Minnisquam Echo, July 2016)
- Shelly the snapping turtle deemed healthy (Laconia Daily Sun, April 2018)
- Turtle re-homed after 24 years at Camaro Heaven (Laconia Daily Sun, Sept 2021)
NH Animal Rights League Gets Involved

Still unwilling to give up trying to help Shelly, Hillarie contacted the NH Animal Rights League. NHARL got involved immediately but ran into the same roadblocks: no laws were being broken, and the owners did not want to give up the turtle.

Nevertheless, NHARL continued to try and convince the owners that Shelly would be better off elsewhere, while at the same time searching for an appropriate home. Being large and long-lived, snapping turtles are difficult to place.

Releasing Shelly back into the wild was not an option. Even if she were able to adapt to the elements and find food, not having built up a resistance to disease and parasites meant she would likely perish.

A Change of Heart

Years passed and the situation seemed hopeless. Then a new NHARL board member picked up the fight. In approaching Shelly’s captor, she found that he’d had a change of heart and now realized the turtle would be better off elsewhere.

With renewed purpose, NHARL contacted every obvious potential home in NH; then expanded the search to surrounding states.

A promising option at a Vermont farm sanctuary with a pond fell through at the last minute, due to that state’s stricter possession laws.

Then NHARL found the Turtle Rescue League, a licensed native turtle rehabilitation clinic in Southbridge, MA, co-founded by Alexxia Bell and Natasha Nowick.
A friend of NHARL poses in front of the Turtle Rescue League ambulance

The Turtle Rescue League agreed to take Shelly as a permanent resident, and NHARL agreed to provide the funding needed to build her a habitat. A date was picked to make the transfer!

**Liberation Day**

On a beautiful September morning, NHARL board member Joan O’Brien met Alexxia Bell and Natasha Nowick of the Turtle Rescue League at the used auto parts store in Tilton, NH where Shelly had spent her first 24 years.

Board member Linda Dionne would be on the other end in Massachusetts to witness the turtle’s arrival at her new home.

The photos below document the events of the day.

Note that Shelly was given a new name that day, as is typical; otherwise, the Turtle Rescue League would have hundreds of turtles named “Shelly.”
Example of a quarantine tank, where new turtle residents are kept for a period

Natasha removes Shelly from the tank for the last time
Alexxia and Natasha perform a health check

Turtle is deemed obese at 32 lbs.
Making sure the turtle is able to walk

NHARL board member Joan O’Brien takes a photo
Alexxia prepares to transport Shelly

Saying farewell
Close up

Natasha renames the turtle Miękki, the Polish word for soft
Example of habitat to be constructed

Miękki explores the habitat
Turtle habitat at the Turtle Rescue League

Example of a quarantine tank, where new turtle residents are kept for a period
Natasha removes Shelly from the tank for the last time

Settling Into Her New Home

These photos of Miękki (previously named Shelly) were taken on October 1, 2021 during an outdoor exercise session.

Her shell turns up at the bottom, when it should be rounded, because her diet was deficient in calcium. Lacking wild vegetation or other good sources of calcium, her body was forced to take the calcium it needed from her shell.
As you can see, Miękki still has some weight to lose. 😊