

Cheer for the Turtle

Courtesy of Mike Lathroum, Maryland Natural Resources Police

Anyone who is a fan of the University of Maryland Terrapins, Terps for short, will be familiar with their current slogan "Fear the Turtle". Truth be known, until recently, the real life version of this familiar college mascot and Maryland's state reptile has had much to fear.

The diamondback terrapin, *Malaclemmys terrapin*, which includes several subspecies, is the only native North American turtle that has adapted to living solely in the brackish waters of our salt marshes and bays along the east coast of the United States and the Gulf of Mexico, from Massachusetts to Texas.

Terrapins exhibit a wide range of color variations from black to spotted patterns, typically on a light gray background. They are characterized by concentric layers on the carapace (top portion of the turtles's shell) giving them a diamond appearance, thus the common name. They are powerful swimmers with well developed, webbed hind legs. Terrapins are sexually dimorphic with the females getting much larger than the males.

The diamondback terrapin was almost extirpated toward the end of the 19th and early 20th century due to a burgeoning domestic demand for terrapin soup, particularly in trendy restaurants of the time. Prior to the large scale market hunting of terrapins which occurred during this time, they were collected as a food source by Native Americans and early settlers to feed slaves. Fortunately for the terrapins, turtle soup fell out of vogue and the populations rebounded from the brink of extinction.



Fast forward to the 1990's. For years Maryland has had a commercial season on diamondback terrapins allowing licensed commercial fishermen to harvest them, with the only real restriction being that the terrapin had to measure at least six inches from the longest portion of the plastron (bottom portion of the turtle's shell) parallel to the center line.

Personally, I always questioned the sense in that particular regulation because of the sexual dimorphism in terrapins. The majority of them, which will reach the six inch plastron length requirement, are going to be breeding age female terps. We should have learned a while back that you can't

target the females of a species and expect to retain a sustainable population.

Apparently, there was not a high demand for terrapin and there were very few commercial watermen who supplemented their income by targeting the species.

During this time, however, other hazards would start to plague the terrapins such as crab pots and destruction of nesting habitat for beach front development. This trend continued until 2006, when in response to lobbying by special interest groups, emergency regulations were passed to protect the terrapin. These emergency regulations included the requirement for a terrapin license, a shorter open season for harvest and a four to six inch plastron length measurement slot aimed at reducing the harvest of mature females.

Unfortunately, these emergency regulations failed to produce the intended results. In fact, the new regulations unwittingly created a larger market for Maryland terrapins, instead of decreasing the demand, as intended.

Since male terrapins rarely attain a carapace length of more than four to five inches the new regulations created an inadvertent pet market. Due to the terrapins striking coloration and natural charisma they have a lot of appeal to hobbyists. Chesapeake Bay terrapins were now being marketed on the internet and being shipped worldwide in some cases. There has also been an increased demand for turtles overseas, particularly in Southeast Asia, where their native species have been decimated by over harvest, due to the demand for turtle



meat and traditional remedies. They turned their attention to the US where turtles suddenly became the new cash crop.

I personally became aware of the plight facing our native turtles when I received information about an individual here who was locally peddling terrapins for sale on the internet. Based on information contained in the ads it became readily apparent that there were potential violations occurring and an investigation was initiated.

I contacted the individual at his residence and he confirmed that he did place the ads on the net for the sale of the terrapins. I inquired as to how he was acquiring these turtles and was informed that he purchased them for four to five dollars each from a seafood wholesaler who was purchasing them from the watermen for two dollars each. Additional questioning revealed that while some of the turtles were headed to the pet trade others were intended for overseas shipping for use as breeders in turtle farms. The suspect rationalized this by saying that providing terrapins to the turtle farms would take the demand off wild turtles, when in reality he was helping to fuel the demand for them. It's funny how money can make people see things differently.

I asked to see the turtles and was led outside. There, housed in a variety of Rubbermaid containers and cattle troughs full of greenish gray, foul smelling, unfiltered water, were dozens of live turtles, mostly terrapins. In some cases they were stacked on top of each other in their crude holding cells to the point that I think it is unlikely that they could even stretch out fully without contacting several other terrapins around them. Due to the hour and lack

of sufficient light it quickly became apparent that there was no way to effectively measure and document all of the terrapins on site. I snapped a few pictures and gave the suspect a lawful order indicating that I was seizing all of the turtles on site as evidence and that I would be back in the morning with additional manpower to inventory and remove the terrapins.

The next morning, with assistance from several other officers, we returned to the residence and removed the turtles, which were transported to a holding facility. Each was measured and both oversized and undersized terrapins were found in the lot. Additionally, the accused was in possession of too many spotted turtles without a Captive Reptile and Amphibian Permit and possessed turtles with less than a four inch carapace, as restricted by both federal and state laws. Some 250 turtles and terrapins later and we were done.

After researching various laws and regulations the accused, Mark Ledbetter from Severn, Maryland, was later charged with the following violations: possession of undersized terrapins, possession of oversized terrapins, failure to obtain a seafood dealers license, possession of wildlife without a permit, possession of more than one spotted turtle without a permit, possession of wild caught Maryland spotted turtles, possession of turtles with less than a four inch carapace length.

Before the case was heard in court about two months later, Ledbetter paid out the citations relating to the spotted turtles. He elected to stand trial on the various charges relating to the diamondback terrapins. The judge found him guilty on all counts, imposed fines totaling \$1,735, and forfeited all of the contraband terrapins. The terrapins were released back into the Chesapeake Bay after receiving a clean bill of health from the veterinarians at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, just in time for them to burrow down into the mud to hibernate.

On July 1, 2007 a new regulation went into effect permanently closing the commercial harvest of terrapins in the State of Maryland. While the terrapin still has other hurdles to overcome including loss of suitable nesting sites, drowning in crab pots and other fishing gear and boat propeller collisions, their future is looking brighter by the day and their continued existence in

Maryland has hopefully been secured. Go Terps!🐢

"When Whip-poor-wills Call"

by Bill Armstrong



From the mountains of West Virginia to the tidal marshes of the Chesapeake Bay, a glimpse into the life of a game warden; along with a sprinkling here and there of JFK, Hank Williams and the sound of a whip-poor-will on a summer evening.

"The game warden's life is sometimes funny, sometimes sad and sometimes scary ... but it's always an adventure!"

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Colonel Jim Fields (retired)
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