

DNR acts to protect state reptile

Proposed rules would shorten diamondback terrapin season, toughen permit system

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The Department of Natural Resources proposed regulations yesterday to protect Maryland's state reptile, the diamondback terrapin, from over-harvesting.

The regulations, which came as a compromise after legislators proposed a moratorium on terrapin harvesting, will shorten the season from nine months to three months and require a stricter permit system for watermen who catch the turtles. The new rules will also change the size limits from the 6 inches watermen can catch now to 4-7 inches.

Michael Slattery, assistant secretary of natural resources, said the size change reflects concern that watermen are catching too many mature females, which are 7 inches or larger at their most fertile state.

The shorter season will also protect the reptile during nesting time. During nesting, terrapins burrow in the mud in dense concentrations, and watermen can easily find them and scoop them out.

Though DNR records show that only a handful of watermen harvest terrapins, Slattery acknowledged that the agency doesn't have statistics on how many of the turtles are in the bay or how many are taken out.

Many watermen catch terrapins inadvertently while they're crabbing or fishing and don't bother reporting them to the DNR, Slattery said.

No catch limit There is no limit on the number of terrapins watermen can catch in a day, and the department isn't proposing such a cap. But the agency would like to issue separate permits for terrapin catches in hopes of keeping better track of the stock.

"We agree that additional conservation action is warranted, but the scientific basis for that is lacking," Slattery said. "Despite what people would have you believe, they're abundant."

Terrapin Institute founder Marguerite M. Whilden disagrees. Whilden, who worked at DNR for 30 years before the Ehrlich administration laid her off in 2003, said Slattery doesn't have adequate information to make decisions that protect the species.

"I don't think Mike's proposal is good for the species. It might be good for Mike, it may be good for the governor, but it's not good for the species. And DNR has not done what's good for the species in I don't know for how long," she said.

Whilden has offered to buy out the watermen in exchange for a moratorium. Based on the 2003 terrapin harvest, a buyout would cost her \$7,000 a year. Whilden said she has approached the watermen who catch terrapins about the idea, and they've been receptive.

Whilden has been using her funds to buy terrapins, tag them and release them into the wild. She said she's bought the reptiles with her tags on them several times, including at a fish market in Albany, N.Y.

Legislation opposed In March, the House Environmental Matters Committee discussed legislation imposing a moratorium on catching terrapins.

But after DNR opposed such a move, the legislature instead passed a bill requiring the department to come up with regulations.

Diamondback terrapins are not officially considered endangered in Maryland, but they have long faced threats. Decades ago, turtle soup was a staple on menus at many high-end restaurants, though it's hardly ever found anymore.

And, despite biologists' efforts to protect habitat, terrapins are often on the losing end of the building boom. They've lost miles of shoreline to beach condos, mansions, and roads. They're often killed when crossing state Route 1 in Delaware, which crosses their path from [Rehoboth](#) Bay and Indian River Bay to the ocean.

Maryland Watermen's Association President Larry Simns said the real threat to the terrapins is rampant development, not the handful of watermen who harvest the turtles.

"With shoreline property owners putting in bulkheads [on shorelines], terrapins don't have a place to lay their eggs," Simns said. "There's nothing in the regulations that says they have to protect the spawning area and that they can't build."

Comments must be received by July 17. For a copy of the regulation, call 410-260-8260 or e-mail Sarah Widman at swidman@dnr.state.md.us.

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