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From the Baltimore Sun

With no protection from wholesale slaughter, the turtle has much to fear

By David S. Lee

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Demand for Maryland's diamondback terrapin is threatening to wipe out the state's beloved turtle, and state officials who should be protecting the terrapin are contributing to its demise.

Maryland regulates terrapins under its Fisheries Service and manages them like fish. In turn, the commercial fishermen and the seafood dealers who store and ship them treat terrapins like other seafood products.

But unlike fish, which soon die when removed from water, terrapins - being air-breathing - don't die, at least not in a timely manner. Turtles can survive for long periods stacked in boxes. Left on docks overnight, they often freeze, only to thaw the next day. Dealers have told me of terrapins whose frozen limbs are so brittle that they break when you pull them.

Yanked from hibernation spots on the bottom, or snared in nets like fish, terrapins start their journey to fish markets. Then, after being stored alive for days or weeks, they are finally sold to people who prepare them by dropping the living turtles directly into boiling water.

There are no catch limits, so during years of poor oyster or crab harvest, a Maryland commercial fisherman can regroup and cut his losses with terrapins. The concepts behind fish management are built on creatures like fish, oysters and crabs that annually produce thousands of eggs, and species that typically mature in a year or so. The same commercial regulations don't work for a slow-growing turtle with a small annual egg output. In fact, they live as long as most people.

So, what is the big deal? Excluding the humane aspects - and leaving aside the fact that Maryland recognizes this "fish" as its state reptile and university mascot - the real issue is the health of the [Chesapeake Bay's](#) terrapin population. In addition to the harvest, Maryland's terrapins face a number of additional problems. These include shoreline development, drowning in crab pots, being run over by cars on their way to nesting

sites, erosion of nesting beaches, pollution, high mortality as by-catch in fishing nets, and nesting females ground up during road-shoulder mowing. The annual cumulative effect is significant. Decades of neglect and total lack of appropriate conservation efforts are placing terrapins in jeopardy.

Someone needs to educate the Department of Natural Resources. Terrapins are turtles, and turtles are a type of reptile. School kids know this. Why can't it be recognized by Maryland's government? The National Weather Service does not regulate National Parks, the Navy does not control forest management, and the Department of Health and Human Services does not oversee the world's oceans. Why does the Maryland Fisheries Service dictate the fate of the state reptile?

For people and conservation organizations concerned with the welfare of the bay's terrapins, the situation is frustrating. Animal welfare groups and conservation organizations have little experience with fisheries administrators, and they see terrapin issues from different perspectives.

In 2001, then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening appointed a task force to look at the situation. Its main recommendation was a moratorium on commercial terrapin harvesting until a baywide stock assessment could be conducted; it also proposed limitations on issuing new commercial licenses. DNR's fisheries staff essentially ignored the panel's primary recommendations and modified the secondary ones to the point that they were meaningless.

In the meantime, demand for terrapins increased drastically. Commercial fishermen discovered that the Asian community, both at home and abroad, had a bottomless appetite for terrapins. Exporters and dealers use Internet message boards to let it be known to commercial fishermen that they were ready to purchase terrapins by the ton and ship them to China. The trade is now in full swing: The number of individuals holding commercial terrapin licenses has quadrupled in recent years. Boxes full of terrapins shipped to Asia are unmonitored as they are simply and legally labeled "seafood."

A petition against commercial use of terrapins is in circulation. Several bills to completely close the industry are being prepared and may be introduced in the next General Assembly session. On scientific, biological and humane grounds, closure is the only option. Yet, even if the bills pass, there is little doubt that in the future commercial interests will petition the state Fisheries Service to alter state regulations to reopen the fishery.

It's time for these terrapins, among the most celebrated of American reptiles, to stop being managed like fish. The stewardship of the bay's terrapin needs to be transferred to another agency, and commercial exploitation needs to end.

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