

A Modern-day Terrapin Fishery in the Bay: Maryland's Modern-day Concern

1. A terrapin fishery is not sustainable.

- There is a large body of scientific literature showing that turtle populations in general and specifically those of terrapins cannot support commercial fisheries and that it takes many decades for them to recover once fisheries are closed. Over 50% of all turtles species are currently endangered, most as a result of commercial exploitation.
- The only long-term study of terrapins in the Bay shows a 75% decrease in the Patuxent River's terrapins over the last 20 years.
- A mark and release of program that focused on live terrapins purchased from local fishermen showed that a number of the marked turtles were again removed from the Bay and showed up in New York's Chinatown markets. Some individuals were purchased, rescued, and released several times.
- A 2003-2005 federal population study by USGS in the Smith Island and Martin National Wildlife Refuge Area marked approximately 7,800 individuals. In 2006 one fisherman living near this site obtained 5,000 terrapins, half of which were shipped to China.

2. The people of Maryland do not want their terrapins commercially harvested.

- Terrapins are Maryland's State reptile and the University of Maryland's mascot.
- The Terrapin Petition to close the terrapin harvest has over 3,000 signatures and counting and 1,003 Marylanders sent in letters asking DNR Fisheries for a closure through Defenders of Wildlife during the public comment period on their new regulations.
- Local conservation groups and others support closure of the terrapin fishery. The Humane Society of the United States, The Terrapin Institute, The Chesapeake Terrapin Alliance, The Maryland Natural History Society, The Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society, The Maryland Herpetological Society, The M.A.R.S. Preservation Fund, The National Aquarium, The Coastal Conservation Association of Maryland, Defenders of Wildlife, several Audubon societies and canoe clubs, and dedicated research scientists are all trying to get the Bay's terrapin fishery closed.



3. The state does not have any data to support that a sustainable fishery can exist yet they continue to allow terrapins to be commercially exploited.
 - There are no current Bay wide population estimates.
 - Terrapins live in localized populations and do not migrate throughout the Bay.
 - There are no former population estimates to serve as benchmarks.
 - Information on annual take is inadequate and incomplete.
 - New (2006) regulations written to help populations appear to be having a more negative impact than the former ones.

4. The market is expanding. In the last five years the demand for terrapins has increased exponentially because of growing Asian food markets.
 - Prior to the mid-1990s the terrapin market was all but nonexistent ever since its collapse in the early part of that century. It is not clear how well the population rebounded from its original mid-century collapse.
 - The new market is both regional (US and Canada) and overseas (China).
 - Out-of-state dealers have advertised that they are willing to purchase terrapins by the ton for overseas export.
 - Large numbers of live terrapins have been seen being shipped to China from our regional airports.
 - Terrapin populations could not even be sustained during local marketing in the early 1900s. Today with a global market and modern day transportation it is expected that the Bay's populations will crash quickly.
 - Profits derived from Maryland's terrapins go largely to out-of-state exporters and to overseas markets.

5. Because of the expanding market most other states have now closed commercial terrapin fisheries because of conservation concerns.
 - Terrapin fisheries are now closed in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Virginia, North Carolina (2004), South Carolina (March 2006), Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi.
 - Closure is proposed in Texas (2007).
 - Because of closure in other states the demand for Maryland's terrapins has now increased.
 - Terrapins illegally taken in other states can be laundered into markets through Maryland.
 - For over a decade terrapins have been considered for assessment regarding listing as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

6. There are a number of humane issues associated with marketing live terrapins.
 - They are treated like fish, but unlike fish they do not die at the time of capture. They are maintained alive for prolonged periods in inhumane conditions during storage, shipping and at markets.
 - Shipping regulations for live terrapins do not follow those required for other wildlife because they are considered a form of seafood.
 - Terrapins are butchered or boiled alive as discussed in the Baltimore Sun paper.
7. Terrapins like other turtles are long lived (50+ yrs), slow growing, exhibit a low annual reproductive yield and thereby are poor candidates for commercializing.
8. Currently the Bay's terrapin populations already suffer from a wide array of other problems that negatively affect both them and their habitats.
 - Other critical issues include: drowning of large numbers in crab pots and fish nets, loss of nesting beaches, significant annual road mortality, and pollution.
9. Maryland DNR Fisheries is keenly aware of all these issues but continues to support its terrapin fishery.
 - The number of commercial fishermen with terrapin licenses quadrupled in 2006 from the yearly average and Fisheries did not follow the permitting process stated in their emergency regulations.
 - DNR Fisheries has misled the media and State legislators as to what the scientific community and local conservation groups have actually stated.
 - DNR Fisheries boast that all decisions are "based on the best available science" yet there is no evidence to support that a terrapin fishery in the Bay is sustainable.
 - DNR Fisheries has essentially ignored the recommendations of the 2001 Governor's Terrapin Task Force, despite the recommendations of the Task Force being an Executive Order.

Maryland's terrapin fishery needs to be permanently closed!



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