

Fears for the Turtle Prompt Clandestine Rescue Mission

Buyers Seek Bay's Terrapin for Soup

By Elizabeth Williamson
Washington Post Staff Writer
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About four times a month, Marguerite Whilden gets a call from her connection and drives her gold Jeep Cherokee to undisclosed locations to meet strange men. She pays \$50, \$100, even \$1,000, cash. Then she places the plain brown boxes carefully in her truck and drives off.

Two clues betray her mission. Something in the Jeep smells fishy. And the words on the side of the box: "Live Seafood."

"This is really not good for my reputation, and it scares me at times," she says. "But it keeps these turtles alive."

With 20 volunteers and a \$15,000 budget, Whilden labors to keep one of the Chesapeake Bay's most beloved species, the diamondback terrapin, out of the soup. Demand for the winsome state reptile, the University of Maryland mascot, comes from a new source these days. Asian gourmets eat turtles, believing they promote longevity -- everybody's, that is, but the terrapins'.

Over the past three years, terrapin harvests have surged. Tired of waiting for the state to react, Whilden launched her guerrilla-style rescue program in late 2003. She's bought 5,000 terrapins from a clandestine network of sellers, tagged them and returned them to the bay.

"I feel the stress on the species right now is increasing at an alarming rate," said Whilden, 52, an Annapolis resident and former fisheries employee at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. "Turtles were the most valuable thing fished in the Chesapeake."

It's an unorthodox, often unrewarding effort. Vandals have trashed her release sites, forcing her to keep them secret. Marine biologists and state natural resources officials, who eliminated her turtle program for children, question her methods and assessment of the creatures' decline. And during fishing season, her turtle tags do nothing to stop the harvest. Last month, three of her turtles wound up -- alive, pregnant and for sale even though they were above the legal size limit -- in a New York fish market.

Environmentalists agree that Whilden's effort is important, because she is striving to head off a species's decline before it turns critical. That's something that conservationists want to do but that state budgets often don't allow.

"Margie's raised awareness of issues involving terrapins in Maryland," said Richard Bohn, of the state's fisheries service. "The data would suggest that they're becoming a targeted market."

On a recent afternoon, Whilden stood over plastic pools swirling with 300 terrapins, their shells marked with camouflage-colored circles that look like eyes. Several periscoped above the surface, giving her a once-over.

Whilden perched a terrapin on an upended flowerpot. It craned around, legs churning, and hissed. She drilled two tiny holes in the mottled shell above its left rear leg and attached a yellow wire tag marked with a number.

"I don't want to do this," she said, wincing as the drill went in. "I would like the state to step up to the plate and manage the harvest."

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Whilden's Terrapin Institute and Research Consortium makes its home in Discovery Village in Shady Side, a bayside nature center that lets the group use its basement for free. About a third of the institute's budget, \$5,000 a year, comes from a Pepco environmental grant and a third from the University of Maryland's "Fear the Turtle" fund. The rest comes from private donors and Whilden herself.

While diamondback terrapins are found from Cape Cod to Texas, the Chesapeake's brackish waters have been ideal for them. Easily caught and portable, the turtles were an important food source for colonists. By the end of the 19th century, terrapins were scarce.

A change in tastes helped them rebound, but today, "we're walking a fine line because we don't know what the population status is," said Paul Piavis, a biologist with the fisheries service. "We know they are swimming against the tide, with all the habitat issues affecting them."

Each year, hundreds of terrapins are killed by boat propellers, run over on roadways or drowned in crab pots. Rock and timber shoreline reinforcements keep them from reaching the soft sand they need to nest, concentrating them in only a few areas of the bay.

But most troubling, wildlife experts say, is the terrapins' new popularity as dinner, which state game officials believe is partly fueled by the tastes of Asians, one of the country's fastest-growing immigrant groups, and big buyers on the export market.

Between 2000 and 2004, according to the state, Maryland's diamondback terrapin harvest surged from zero to 2,800 pounds. But seafood dealers in the state report buying 10,000 pounds of terrapins in 2004, a discrepancy the state can't readily explain. Virginia bans commercial terrapin fishing, but in Maryland there's a nine-month open season, with no limit.

Virtually all terrapins sold as food are the meatier females, which can take up to 10 years to reach the legal size for harvesting.

"There's nothing like killing the female to reduce the population," said Mike Haramis, wildlife biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Laurel.

In Maryland it is legal to harvest hibernating turtles. Modern dredging equipment could scrape "100 to 200 terrapins an hour" off the bottom of a cove, Haramis said, wiping out its terrapin population in a day. The Maryland Watermen's Association, however, says watermen do not currently power-dredge terrapins.

In 1998, Whilden worked for the fisheries service and began running Terrapin Station, a program using the turtles to teach ecological lessons to kids. In 2003, Whilden's job was eliminated, disappointing, among others, Comptroller William Donald Schaefer, who sent Whilden a note reading: "Save the terrapin . . . you do it!"

On her own, she began buying more and more turtles, most of them from seafood sellers whom she meets secretly -- to protect their identities -- and whom she pays at market rate. She has bought as many as 500 at once, housing them temporarily in her bathtub and in the beach cabana of a friend. Over time, she found she was buying her own tagged turtles, sometimes three times.

She wrote a letter to the Watermen's Association, which represents people who fish the bay, asking them to leave her turtles alone. "Maybe I could cut a deal," she said, laughing. "I'll stop buying them and pay you to stay home."

Larry Simns, president of the Watermen's Association, calls the letter "a first sign that she was starting to get too radical."

"I think she's in love with the turtles so much that she's afraid somebody's going to hurt one of them," he said. Simns calls turtle harvesting "a good fill-in for us. It's a time of year when we're not making much money."

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As dusk fell on Discovery Village one recent day, Whilden and three volunteers tagged the last terrapin and loaded the seafood boxes into a pickup. They formed a three-car caravan, driving along the bay's western shore. When they reached a quiet spot on the South River -- with luxury houses visible on one side of a cove and, on the other, the sandy beach she restored as a nesting spot -- they opened the boxes and gently lifted each female onto the sand.

In a jagged line, the turtles made their lumbering way to the water's edge and half-hopped, half-flopped home.

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