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## Opinion

# Free the turtle

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For an animal revered as an emblem, Maryland's diamondback terrapin isn't getting much respect. Once abundant in the Chesapeake Bay's brackish waters, the turtle was devastated by overharvesting a century ago and has suffered a dramatic loss of habitat, particularly nesting beaches, since then. How many diamondbacks are left in a state that touts the species as the official state reptile and University of Maryland mascot? Nobody knows for sure.

This much is clear: Demand for the turtles is escalating, particularly among Asian gourmets here and elsewhere around the country, and Maryland has done little to protect the species from being wiped out. Marguerite M. Whilden, a former Maryland Department of Natural Resources employee who now runs the nonprofit Terrapin Institute, purchased and released into the wild 3,000 terrapin from Maryland seafood dealers last year. That should raise a serious alarm.

Why? In the 1980s and 1990s, Maryland watermen reported a far smaller harvest - less than 50 pounds in some years. And in 2005, watermen told the DNR they harvested 724 pounds of terrapin (down from 2,822 pounds the year before). That suggests less-than-truthful reporting given Ms. Whilden's first-hand experience. And there are other troubling signs: About one in five of the diamondbacks she purchases are returns (they already bear the identifying tags she attaches to shells prior to repatriation).

In Maryland, it's legal to harvest terrapin for most of the year and there's no limit to the maximum size that can be caught. That poses a problem since the largest terrapin are the sexually mature females. Take too much breeding stock out of the bay and the species is bound for trouble. The turtles are particularly easy targets in the winter months when they bury in the shallows and can be scraped up by watermen.

Howard J. King III, DNR's director of fisheries, says he supports stronger regulations to protect diamondbacks. Currently, fewer than 10 watermen are licensed to catch them. But a better solution may be to ban commercial harvest altogether. Virginia has. The economic impact would be minimal, and a state where sports fans cry, "fear the turtle," will also show it a little respect.

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