

Eighth graders urge Assembly to protect terrapins  
 By CONNOR ADAMS SHEETS  
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**ANNAPOLIS** — Eighth-grade students from St. Andrew's United Methodist Day School in Edgewater joined conservationists and legislators Wednesday to support a statewide moratorium on harvesting diamondback terrapins.

"It is an embarrassment that we the citizens of Maryland are depleting the population of our own state symbol," Justin Zenker, a student in Georgia Perry's social studies class told a House committee. "I think we need to put an end to this excessive harvesting."

The students were in Annapolis to support a bill proposed by Del. Virginia P. Clagett, D-Anne Arundel, to impose a moratorium on catching terrapins.

Perry's class is involved in an initiative called We the People: Project Citizen, that is aimed at getting kids fired up about public policy. Through the program, the students did nearly all the work required to find, research and promote a cause in the Legislature.

"They do it. I don't do anything," Perry said. "All I do is guide them. They did their own research and wrote their own testimony. That's the essence of the project."

Harvesting terrapins for commercial purposes has become more and more popular in recent years, and as a result the practice has garnered increased attention.

The diamondback terrapin is a treasured species in Maryland. It became the official state reptile in 1994, and is the official mascot of the University of Maryland, the state's flagship university.

Terrapins are also prized as a delicacy. They are often cooked lobster-style by throwing them into boiling water while still alive. Their meat is the key ingredient in terrapin stew, a traditional Maryland dish.

Though the diamondback terrapin is not on the Fish and Wildlife Service's official endangered species list, the bill's proponents worry it will be soon if no action is taken to protect it.

According to state documents, in 1891, some 89,000 lbs. of terrapin were harvested from Maryland waters. With few exceptions, annual harvests since 1956 have remained below 11,000 lbs.

Currently, there is no limit to the number of terrapins a properly-licensed harvester may collect, though there is a minimum size requirement, and they may only be taken between August 1 and April 30, according to the Department of Natural Resources.

William Moulden, chairman of the Diamondback Terrapin Task Force, a group of experts and scientists that was formed in 2000 by then-Governor Parris N. Glendening to look into diamondback terrapin issues and recommend actions to protect the animal's population, gave testimony on behalf of Clagett's bill.

The report concluded that though there are no reliable, recent population estimates, "the Maryland diamondback terrapin is an historically notable species in decline and in need of increased State



FILE PHOTO BY  
 ROXANE DOSTER  
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A diamondback terrapin, about one year old, makes its way to the water after being released.

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protections.”

Moulden went further Wednesday, saying he believes the situation is dire enough to warrant a harvest ban.

“There is notable evidence right now that this animal is in decline,” he said. “It is quite popular to say ‘let’s study this.’ I’m all for that – while the fishery is closed.”

On the other side are commercial fishermen and DNR. They said they want to protect terrapin populations, but that measures to do so are better left to regulatory agencies, such as DNR, and that they should be based on strong scientific reasoning.

DNR supports the bill, with amendments that would allow the agency to retain the authority to “regulate terrapin collection” and require that the department put various regulations and plans in place in accordance with the terrapin task force’s findings.

“Once something’s in statute you have to wait until the next legislative session to change it,” Mike Slattery, assistant secretary of DNR, said. “Fish and wildlife populations fluctuate pretty wildly and we need a more efficient mechanism to respond to these trends.”

The president of the Maryland Watermen’s Association, Larry Simns, said he has many of the same concerns, but that his organization does not support the bill, with or without amendments.

“It’s the wrong way to manage any resource – through emotional testimony, politics and the legislature,” Simns said. “It should be managed scientifically. We don’t want to start a precedent that every time someone has a little beef they can come in here and get a bill passed. That would eventually eliminate the watermen of the Chesapeake.”

Edward Wilson, a volunteer at the Terrapin Institute, a public charity dedicated to protecting the species, said he is worried about increasing demand for Maryland’s terrapins in Asian countries, especially China, where the turtle is imported and eaten because of a traditional medicine belief that terrapins have cancer-curing properties.

“On February 16 an ad appeared on a watermen’s webpage by a guy named Snakeman,” Wilson said, “offering to buy Maryland terrapins by the ton to export to China.”

Whether or not the bill passes, the students of Georgia Perry’s eighth-grade class got to experience the legislative process first-hand, and felt the pride of making their views known.