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*From the Baltimore Sun*

## House bill aims to ban harvesting of terrapins

### Watermen, DNR argue for limits on the number that may be caught

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Sun reporter

March 21, 2006

Fear for the turtle.

Worried that a growing market for the meat of diamondback terrapins may wipe out a symbol of Maryland, some state legislators are proposing to outlaw harvesting the turtle in the [Chesapeake Bay](http://www.baltimoresun.com/travel/beaches/bal-beach-chesbay.0.2157147.html).

But watermen and the state Department of Natural Resources are fighting an outright ban, arguing that terrapins are not endangered and that more modest state regulations restricting the catch would make more sense.

"I think this subject is important because the terrapin is in decline once again," said Del. Virginia P. Clagett, an Anne Arundel Democrat who is one of 18 sponsors of House Bill 980, which would prohibit the catching of terrapins. "Any species lost is a real loss, but this also happens to be the state icon."

Clagett said she finds it frustrating that neighboring Virginia - which does not feature the "Terp" as the proud mascot of its state university - outlaws the commercial harvest of terrapins, but Maryland does not. "If they can do it, we can do it," she said.

At the center of the debate, which flared before the House Environmental Matters Committee recently, is the unanswered question of how many terrapins still swim in the bay, and whether their numbers are really falling or rising.

The shy reptiles - up to 9 inches long, with distinctive diamond-shaped growth rings on their shells - live in coastal waters from Massachusetts to Texas, but historically have been found in greatest numbers in the [Chesapeake Bay](http://www.baltimoresun.com/travel/beaches/bal-beach-chesbay.0.2157147.html). Considered a delicacy in soup, they were harvested nearly to extinction at the end of the 19th century.

Howard King, director of fisheries at the DNR, said that perhaps hundreds of thousands of terrapins remain the Maryland portion of the bay. Local watermen, who often catch them in their fishing nets by accident, sell between 5,000 and 12,000 pounds of the turtles every year, King said. The turtles weigh between 1 and 4 pounds each.

More than 2,000 watermen have licenses from the state that allow the catching of the turtles, as well as other marine life. But only five to nine watermen specialize in catching terrapins, mostly around Smith Island and Tangier Sound, King said.

The state imposes no limit on the number of terrapins that a person with a license can catch, and the season lasts three-quarters of the year, from Aug. 1 through April 30.

As an alternative to a moratorium imposed by legislation, the Department of Natural Resources may propose limiting the season, capping the catch or reducing the number of watermen with terrapin licenses, King said.

"It's hard to tell if they are declining or not," King said. "The terrapin issue is certainly not critical. They deserve conservation, but the population is not at a critically low level."

Marguerite Whilden, a former DNR fisheries manager who now directs a nonprofit conservation organization called the Terrapin Institute, says a growing market for terrapin meat among Chinese restaurants and consumers in Asia is a threat to the turtles.

She estimates that as many as 20,000 terrapins have been netted in the [Chesapeake Bay](http://www.baltimoresun.com/travel/beaches/bal-beach-chesbay,0,2157147.htmlstory) in the last two years, and that perhaps only 35,000 remain.

"We used to be called the Terrapin State. It's an embarrassment that we've been so complacent, and that they are much more concerned about the terrapin in Virginia," Whilden said. "It's a very persistent creature, but once it's gone, it's gone. It can't be raised from the dead."

Her organization is offering to buy terrapins from watermen at market rate - which is about \$4 to \$6 per turtle - so she can return them to the bay. If the state bans terrapin harvesting altogether, Whilden said, her organization would pay to compensate the watermen.

Larry Simms, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association, said he would support capping terrapin harvests at current levels, but not outlawing catching them. "I think terrapin have been doing better the last five or six years. They're not threatened at all," Simms said. "Every time you lose part of your paycheck, it hurts."

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