

Terrapins die in fyke nets near Eastern Neck refuge

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May 8, 2006

EASTERN NECK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE — Martin Kaehny discovered the dead diamondback terrapins April 24 while he was surveying for eagles.



First one fyke net, then another. Then another. Eight nets in all, scattered around the margins of the refuge, all of them filled with dead terrapins.

Kaehny, the manager of the wildlife refuge here, contacted the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Then the Maryland Natural Resources Police came to investigate. Police soon determined that the nets were owned by Harry W. White, 47, of Rock Hall, according to Sgt. Ken Turner of the Maryland Natural Resources Police.

White had set up the nets and thought he had arranged for a friend to check them, Turner said. But there was a misunderstanding, and the nets were untouched for about a week. That turned out to be enough time for the turtles to become trapped and die.

White was cited April 25 for failure to mark commercial gear, Turner said. After being cited, White took down all his nets around the refuge, because he figured "they weren't worth all the trouble," according to Turner.

But the only thing White did wrong was forget to properly tag one of his nets.

Failure to check the fyke nets wasn't an issue — because there are no regulations for that, Turner said.

Kaehny thinks that's a problem.

"With the fyke nets, there is no law that says you got to check them every day," he said. "So they can leave them there, and that's what's got to be changed."

The possibility of bicatch — or the unintentional catching of another species — can be a problem with fyke nets, especially in the spring, according to Kaehny.

"The females are just coming out hibernating, and they're looking for nesting site," Kaehny said. "If that's happened here, it's happening in other creeks."

Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Waterman's Association, called the terrapin deaths "an unfortunate accident or oversight."

"It's very unfortunate because we try to avoid that kind of situation," Simns said. "It's a loss to everybody, and it's not good publicity."

But, he points out, the harvest of terrapins is perfectly legal in Maryland, and some waterman supplement their incomes by catching terrapin. The terrapins in this case would have died anyway, he said — the only difference is that they were wasted because the nets were unchecked for so long.

What's not clear in this case, however, is whether the fyke nets were being used to catch perch (as they generally are), or whether terrapins were being deliberately targeted.

Simns does not think this particular incident near the wildlife refuge points to a need for tighter regulation, mainly because DNR data does not show terrapins to be in any kind of danger.

However, Marguerite Whilden, founder and director of the Shadyside-based Terrapin Institute, thinks this lack of data is easily explained: the DNR isn't being serious about monitoring terrapin populations and harvest numbers.

"We have a very poor understanding of the bicatch," she said. Fyke nets in particular are "a source of mortality for terrapins. Everybody knows that ...This happens every spring."

The only thing unusual about this incident, she said, is the misunderstanding that led to police involvement. Ordinarily the terrapins would be harvested.

Whilden thinks the terrapin harvest should be shut down entirely. She thinks that watermen are catching more and more terrapins, and that the result could be a fatal blow to the species, whose numbers were seriously depleted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

"I think it's completely irresponsible for [the DNR] to leave this harvest open when they don't have a clue," she said.

Simns, however, rejects these claims, since DNR data does not bear out Whilden's dire predictions.

"We'll take good science, but we don't like this individual science that people dream up," Simns said. "It's too emotional. It's not science-based."