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From the Baltimore Sun

Diamondbacks in the rough

February 9, 2007

Last year, the threat facing Maryland's diamondback terrapin was as plain as the little noses on their faces. Demand for them as food or pets had skyrocketed. And a leading terrapin researcher presented compelling evidence that their harvest has been greatly underreported. Considering that Virginia prohibits the harvest of diamondbacks, it looked like a pretty easy call for state lawmakers and the Department of Natural Resources to follow suit.

But what happened next made matters worse. The legislature left the matter in the hands of DNR, and the state agency came up with regulations that, while shortening the season, made it possible for people to harvest much younger animals.

As a result, watermen reported catching about 10,000 turtles last year, a big number for what was considered a tiny industry. As recently as 2005, watermen had declared a terrapin catch of 724 pounds. Considering the average female of the species weighs about one pound, that's alarming - if the reporting is accurate.

Is the Maryland terrapin an endangered species? Probably only the ones playing basketball on Tobacco Road. But that could change quickly. The regulations are woefully inadequate. A moratorium still looks like the more prudent option, particularly since so little is known about the size and health of diamondback stocks and the potential for overharvesting them.

A relative few people catch terrapin, but watermen are bristling at any suggestion of a moratorium. They point out - quite correctly - that the biggest culprit in the decline of the [Chesapeake Bay](#)'s diamondback terrapin is the loss of habitat, particularly the development of waterfront where turtles nest. But that's an argument for, not against, a moratorium. The loss of habitat means terrapin numbers can't bounce back as they once might have. Maryland ought not put such a celebrated species at risk. A moratorium would be far easier to enforce than fishing restrictions that can't factor in the impact on individual tributaries. DNR could use the opportunity to develop better information on the species.

The possibility that Virginia, home of winter crab scraping, is more interested in protecting a natural resource than its northern neighbor should sound an alarm. Fearing for the turtle ought to be, at least first and foremost,

a Maryland thing.

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