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From the Baltimore Sun

Senate vote weakens bill banning turtle trapping

Amendment would allow aquaculture exemption

By Tom Pelton
Sun reporter

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A bill designed to outlaw the trapping of Maryland's diamondback terrapin, which is threatened by a growing market in China, could be weakened by an exemption tentatively approved yesterday.

The state Senate voted 27-19 to amend the proposed ban to allow the continued trapping and possession of the turtles for aquaculture. Supporters said the change was designed to protect a Preston waterman who has started breeding thousands of the turtles in tanks behind his home for sale to Asia for turtle soup.

But the sponsor of the bill, Sen. Roy P. Dyson, said the amendment would "gut" the bill, which was meant to stop all trapping of the terrapin.

Dyson, a Southern Maryland Democrat, said the loophole would allow anyone running a licensed turtle farm to catch thousands of terrapin. They could be held briefly in tanks, then shipped off to China, Dyson said.

"The greater good seems to be taking care of this man's business rather than protecting Maryland's mascot," Dyson said. "They are willing to [risk] the possible extinction of Maryland's state symbol."

The amendment is expected to get a final vote in the Senate today. Then the measure would be sent to the House of Delegates for its consideration.

Last month, the House approved a ban on terrapin trapping, 127-10, and the governor said he would sign the bill if passed.

House Speaker Michael E. Busch said yesterday he was surprised to hear about the Senate amendment. "The philosophy here is to protect the native terrapin and give them an opportunity to replenish themselves. That's

the spirit of the bill, and we should stick with that," Busch said.

The state's only licensed terrapin farmer, Rodney Lewis, said he suggested the amendment. Lewis traps terrapin in nets and also buys captured turtles from other watermen. He keeps the turtles in holding tanks in former farm fields behind his home for breeding and sale to Asia, where they are used in soup.

"There has been too much hype on diamondback terrapin - [the harvest] shouldn't have been closed," Lewis said. "Just to shut it down is really wrong."

Lewis said he called several legislators, including Republican Del. Anthony J. O'Donnell, the House minority leader, who was sympathetic because he sits on the state's Aquaculture Coordinating Council, which promotes fish farming. O'Donnell spoke to another member of the board, Sen. Katherine A. Klausmeier, a Baltimore County Democrat, who offered the amendment.

O'Donnell said he thinks it's a good idea to encourage terrapin farming, which he says ultimately reduces pressure on the wild turtles.

Howard King, director of the fisheries service at the [Maryland Department of Natural Resources](#), said his agency is drafting regulations that would impose a moratorium on all terrapin trapping, including for aquaculture.

"It would not allow trapping of terrapin for aquaculture," King said. But he said the agency would conform to state law if the legislature passes an amendment allowing trapping for turtle farms.

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