

Environmentalists push terrapin harvest ban

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Students, turtle lovers, aquarium workers and recreational fishermen came to Annapolis last night seeking help for the diamondback terrapin, the official state reptile.

Coming from points as far away as Northern Virginia and nearly to the Pennsylvania state line, they sent a loud and clear message to Department of Natural Resources officials - a plan to clamp down on the terrapin harvest doesn't go far enough.

Most of the 30 or so people gathered at DNR headquarters pushed for a ban on harvesting terrapins.

Jack Cover of Harford County, who works at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, said terrapins are an iconic Chesapeake Bay species, much like the great blue heron or the blue crab, and deserve protection and attention.

"While I'd like to see a moratorium, I think these are improved regulations," he said.

Or as Katrina Smith of the Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society put it: "I believe half a loaf is better than none."

Currently there are few limitations on harvesting terrapins.

The DNR proposal would change the catch size from a 6-inch minimum to a minimum of 4 inches and a maximum of 7 inches, to protect large, mature females. The proposal also shortens the season for catching terrapins from nine months to three, and introduces a new permit and reporting system.

DNR officials hope to get emergency regulations in place by Aug. 1, but they need approval by a committee of state senators and delegates. Identical permanent regulations would follow.

Terrapin supporters are worried that demand from Asian diners is putting pressure on the Maryland terrapin fishery. The department's numbers are sketchy, but indicate a sharp increase in the harvest over the last few years. At the same time, important habitat for terrapins, especially sandy bay beaches, is being lost to development.

While most at the meeting supported the regulations as a good first step, the proposal wasn't as easy for Marguerite Whilden to swallow.

She runs the nonprofit Terrapin Institute in Shady Side, buying terrapins at fishmarkets, tagging them and releasing them into the Chesapeake Bay.

"I wish I could be as happy as everyone else in the room, but I think this is a pathetic offering," she said.

Ms. Whilden said that until more is known about the state of the terrapin population, there's no way a harvest can be justified.

"I don't think what we have here is in the best interest of the species," she said. "We have no science."

Just one waterman showed up, Tony Young of Queenstown. He raised concerns that during the proposed season - Aug. 1 to Oct. 31 - the weather will be so hot that terrapins will drown in nets before watermen can get to them.

Last night's meeting was a long time coming for terrapin supporters.

At the behest of former governor Parris N. Glendening, the state convened a task force on terrapin issues in 2001. The task force recommended, among other things, a harvest moratorium until more research could be done.

But the DNR didn't take any action until this year, when a law sponsored by Del. Virginia Clagett, D-West River, mandated action by Oct. 1. Her bill, which was pushed by Ms. Whilden and others, initially required a moratorium, but it got scaled back during the legislative process.

Howard King, the DNR's director of fisheries, acknowledged that his agency's data on terrapins is woefully inadequate. He said the regulations should improve reporting and a moratorium is possible in the future.

"Each year this regulation could change," he said. "We're serious about conserving terrapins."

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