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What the turtle fears

The journey across coastal roads often proves deadly for many terrapins, but new efforts may help save them

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Sun Reporter

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REHOBOTH BEACH, Del. -- Living life in a shell, Lucky wasn't used to all the attention.

As tourists poked, petted and photographed her, the old girl - judging from the barnacles on her back, she'd been around a while - squirmed impatiently, not realizing how good she had it.

Diamondback terrapins along Delaware's coast face fates far worse than being a prop in a science presentation, and Lucky's short and involuntary appearance at Delaware Seashore State Park helped her avoid the most common: being crushed by a car on Coastal Highway.

Lucky is not her real name. She doesn't have one. But it's an apt moniker for a turtle that has survived so long on a stretch of coastline where female terrapins leave the bay and cross four lanes of 50-mph traffic to lay eggs in the sandy dunes on the beach side.

Several times each summer, they cross over, lay their eggs and make the journey back, traffic permitting.

Often, it doesn't.

More than 100 terrapins are killed each year on Delaware's Coastal Highway. The results can be seen on the roadside, where, as part of the effort to keep track of the deaths, carcasses, once counted, are spray-painted a fiery pink. Like a chalk outline at a homicide scene, the glowing silhouette remains long after the corpse is gone.

The diamondback terrapin may be Maryland's state reptile, but their plight here - as elsewhere on the Atlantic coast - serves as a textbook example of how humans, in the name of progress, make a colossal mess of nature, and the lengths they will go to to try to make up for it.

From Bethany Beach to [Rehoboth](#) Beach, scores of volunteers patrol the highway, also known as state Route 1, scouting for turtles that need help crossing the road. Some volunteers, legend has it, have gone so far as to help a terrapin across, wait

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while she lays her eggs in the dunes, then escort her back.

They patrol on foot, on bicycles and, in the case of Kim Hubley, a retired hairdresser from Dagsboro, Del., by car. Three times a week, she cruises up and down the highway - though so far, all the turtles she has spotted have been dead.

"I really want to get a live one and help it across," she said last week, stopping her car nearly as soon as she started. She trained her binoculars on an osprey nest atop a wooden tower that rose from the marsh. "They had to build those because we cut all the natural stuff down," she said.

The volunteers - a mix of long-time wildlife lovers and soft-hearted novices - are coordinated by the Center for the Inland Bays in Lewes, Del. The nonprofit agency is part of the federal government's National Estuary Program, which protects and restores natural habitat in those bodies of water where salt and fresh water meet.

Rescue efforts

The center has taken on the task of tallying dead terrapins and, for the first time this year, is trying to save the eggs of roadkill, rushing them back to an incubator. The first two batches didn't make it.

Meanwhile, the state and the center are working to increase public awareness: Road signs warn drivers to watch for turtles. Information cards are on display at state parks, depicting a terrapin with the caption "Please don't run over me!" And informational programs, like the one Lucky ended up in, teach vacationers about the species and the threats it faces.

As a result, it's not unusual to see three or more drivers stopping to assist a single turtle in crossing the highway - a journey whose odds of success have never been calculated.

"My guess if she makes it once, she's not going to be lucky enough to make it a second time," said Chris Bennett, management specialist for the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control.

To reduce fatalities, the state has installed 2-foot high black silt fencing on the bay side of Delaware Seashore State Park, constructed man-made dunes so terrapins might stay on that side to nest and, as part of a bridge construction project at Indian River Inlet, is installing culverts under the highway large enough to permit terrapins to pass through. The state hopes to install cameras at each end to monitor whether the turtles use the tunnels.

The efforts have made a difference. The number of adult female terrapins killed on the road has dropped each of the last three years, from 75 in 2003, to 44 in 2004, to 27 last year.

The total number of turtle deaths on the highway, however, has changed little. In 2003, 121 were killed; last year, 120; and many of those were hatchlings and juveniles who, after being born on the beach side, still have to make it back to the bay.

"It's tough for them around here," environmental educator Lisa Tossey told a group of parents and children, most of them vacationers, at the Indian River Lifesaving Station Wednesday. She brought out Lucky, who had been found that morning at a nearby campground, and placed her on a picnic table.

"They're very gentle, they don't bite," she said. "The University of Maryland says 'Fear the turtle,' but there's really nothing to fear. ... If you ever see one, and you can help it across, the terrapin will appreciate it."

When the program ended, the group left the park a little more aware. Lucky left, too, transported and released by a park employee - to the bay side.

Eric Irvin finds the ones who weren't so lucky, or at least what is left of them.

Three or four times a week, Irvin hops on a bicycle and rides along Coastal Highway, from Bethany Beach to [Dewey Beach](#),

Equipped with a GPS device, calipers, a clipboard full of forms and a can of spray paint, he pulls over when he comes across a victim, records the location and logs whatever information he can glean from the remains.

"This was a full-grown adult female," he said, lifting the carcass with the eraser end of his pencil and flipping it over. "But I can't tell if she got across and laid her eggs, or if she was on her way and the eggs got splattered along with her."

It was the 15th found dead on the highway this nesting season.

Irvin, a University of Delaware student doing an internship at the Center for the Inland Bays, has yet to come across a live terrapin on his rounds. "Most of them are just, phhhht, all over the road."

Terrapins are not considered an endangered or threatened species and therefore receive no federal protection.

Terrapins were almost harvested into oblivion in the early 1900s when turtle soup and stew were all the rage. That fad passed, thanks in part to Prohibition, which prohibited the sale of sherry, used in most turtle soup recipes. Terrapins rebounded, but nobody is sure how well.

Like most states, including Maryland, Delaware lacks baseline data on its terrapin population, so it's impossible to know what percentage of its terrapins are being killed.

Terrapins spend most of their time basking in the brackish water of estuaries. From late May to mid-July, females head to sandy areas to lay their eggs. They dig holes above the high tide line, 4 to 6 inches deep, lay a dozen or more pinkish white eggs, and then cover them up.

They can live 50 years or more, and it takes seven years for a female terrapin to reach sexual maturity.

Besides natural predators - skunks, raccoon and foxes - terrapins have several unnatural ones: motorboat propellers, lawnmower blades and coastal development that's claiming their habitat, especially bulkheads that prohibit them from coming ashore.

The biggest killers of terrapins nationally, though, are submerged crab and lobster pots, in which smaller terrapins can get stuck and drown. New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware have all adopted requirements for "terrapin excluders" on crab traps.

While there seems to be very little working in their favor, terrapins do have one thing that protects them nearly as well as their shells: the cute factor.

"People's hearts really go out to them, and it's a way they connect with the environment," said Sally Boswell, education and outreach coordinator for the Center for the Inland Bays. (The inland bays are [Rehoboth](#), Indian River and Little Assawoman.)

"The terrapin project has brought a lot of people in our door who go on to become a bigger part of the solution and less a part of the problem."

To say Dr. Roger Wood has been surrogate mom to thousands of terrapins wouldn't be totally correct.

His program at the Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor, N.J., does far more than a terrapin's mother ever would.

Terrapins, after laying their eggs, go back to the marsh, never seeing their offspring again. Wood's program harvests the

eggs from roadkilled terrapin, keeps them in an incubator until they hatch, then nurtures the hatchlings for another 10 months before releasing them.

'Life After Death'

Unofficially referred to at the institute as the "Life After Death Program," it has raised and released about 3,000 terrapins.

It got off to an inauspicious start in the summer of 1989, when Wood, now director of research, and a student started patrolling three roads on the South Jersey coast to help terrapins get across.

"We found a lot of roadkills, but we also discovered you could take undamaged eggs and incubate them, and a lot of those eggs would hatch out," he said.

At the end of that first summer, about 50 of 100 eggs hatched. Wood and his staff, pleased with their results, took the baby terrapins - about the size of quarters - to a marsh.

"We went out to release them one sunny afternoon, and the laughing gulls came and started scarfing them up before they could hide. They were like potato chips for the seagulls; one swallow and they were gone."

That experience led Wood to "headstarting" terrapins - keeping the hatchlings in a room at Richard Stockton College in South Jersey, where he teaches zoology, until they are strong and fast enough to survive. Others are farmed out to schools, where classrooms care for them.

He releases about 100 young terrapins in a typical summer, but each summer more than 400 others die on the roads in [Cape May County](#) alone.

While Wood is giving terrapins a start on life in New Jersey, a Maryland woman is working to prolong their lives.

Marguerite Whilden, a terrapin advocate in [Annapolis](#), has been buying terrapins headed for the market for three years and returning them to [Chesapeake Bay](#).

Cutting deals on back roads and parking lots, with vendors legitimate and slightly less so, she says she has purchased and returned to the bay about 5,000 terrapins.

While wildlife officials in New Jersey and Delaware say there is little, if any, commercial harvesting of terrapins, concerns have increased in Maryland, where Whilden and others have pushed for a moratorium on catching terrapin, as a task force appointed during the Glendening administration recommended in 2001.

The state, citing a lack of evidence that the species' numbers are decreasing, stopped short of that. It is instead drafting a new management plan that shortens the season in which commercial fishermen can harvest terrapins and requires special permits.

The commercial harvest of terrapin in Maryland, as reported by fishermen, increased from zero in 2000 to 2,800 pounds in 2004 before slightly dropping last year. The increase is mainly a result of demand for terrapin in Asian markets, where it is considered a delicacy.

There are indications that more terrapins are harvested than that: Seafood dealers in 2004 reported buying nearly four times what commercial fisherman reported catching.

"Here we have a benign, sympathy-extracting animal, our state reptile, a university mascot," Whilden said. "It's a magnificent creature, but it's only magnificent if there's an abundance out there."

Whilden, who once worked for Maryland's Department of Natural Resources and took part in terrapin headstarting programs at schools, says terrapin numbers are dropping to critical stages.

"It's hypocritical to be parading these turtles around with schoolchildren, and then not setting a good example of stewardship," she said.

Whilden has bought some terrapins several times, returning them to the Chesapeake only to see them - despite her tags - being harvested and sold again.

Last year, she said, four of them ended up at a New York fish market. When her tags were spotted on them though, they were returned to her.

Call them Lucky, too.

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