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Maryland's Real Terrapins, Orioles Not Faring So Well

Population Drops Prompt Study, Rescues

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In the sports world, at least, these are relatively good times for Maryland's Terrapins and Baltimore's Orioles. The University of Maryland's sports teams are perennial contenders, and Baltimore's baseball squad spent the first half of the season near the top of the American League East.

But in nature -- where the oriole and terrapin are not mascots but real, living beings -- the state of the two species in this area is a little shaky. Both creatures are exhibiting symptoms of decline as humans have encroached more and more on their habitats.

Now, far from the limelight afforded their sports counterparts, scientists in Anne Arundel and elsewhere in the state are working to preserve them.

In Anne Arundel, the diamondback terrapin is the more prevalent of the two species. But it's had a difficult past: The turtle, which populates brackish water from Cape Cod to Mexico, once was pushed to the brink of disappearing from the Chesapeake Bay.

That was around 1900, when terrapin meat gained national popularity as a gourmet treat. In 1891, according to the state, watermen hauled in 89,000 pounds of terrapins in a single year. After that craze, the popularity died down, and restrictions on commercial harvesting were enacted.

Now, scientists say they fear the Maryland state reptile may be declining again, but they don't have a firm grasp on the turtle's numbers, either in Maryland or across their full range.

"Nobody really knows," said Mike Haramis, a research biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey.

What scientists do know about terrapins is that their nesting habits put them at odds with humans and development.

Female terrapins like to bury their eggs in soft sand, above the waterline of creeks and streams. In some places, such as the bay's uninhabited Poplar Island or marshy areas of the Eastern Shore, there are still sandy beaches where terrapins can nest. But around much of Anne Arundel, the beaches have been replaced by bulkheads, riprap and other devices aimed at keeping waterside property from eroding.

"Most of Anne Arundel has so much hardened shoreline that it's really marginal habitat" for terrapins, said Willem Roosenburg, a Calvert County native who now studies terrapins as a professor at Ohio University.

Other threats include harvesting by humans: Last year, 2,822 pounds of turtles were reported harvested to the Department of Natural Resources. At about three pounds per turtle, that's a harvest of roughly 940 animals, though officials worry that the total catch is far underreported.

The turtles also are killed by boats -- whose propellers slice the terrapins' shells -- and by foxes and raccoons, which dig out turtle eggs and eat them. Raccoons live well alongside humans and probably have joined the encroachment of suburbia upon stream-side terrapin nests.

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One person trying to help the terrapins in Anne Arundel is Marguerite Whilden, a former Department of Natural Resources employee who has established a terrapin sanctuary on county land along the South River in Edgewater.

On one recent day, Whilden showed where she had dumped 42 tons of sand to create a beach there, and then pointed to the wiggly track of a female terrapin that had walked through seeking a nest.

"Here's the path," she said. "The shell is dragging, the feet push to the side, and then the tail's dragging."

Whilden said she has released several hundred terrapins at this site, most of them purchased from seafood dealers on the open market.

Whilden founded, and is a co-director of, the nonprofit Terrapin Institute and Research Consortium, which, besides the sanctuary and a field station in Edgewater, has offices in Shady Side. Some of her funding comes from the University of Maryland, which funds terrapin research through a small royalty on terrapin mascot merchandise that bears the slogan "Fear the Turtle."

Whilden said she's had some success, noting that 20 nests were counted on the sanctuary property this year. And she said that buying terrapins from the seafood market is an effective way of keeping those turtles from becoming someone's meal or house pet.

But Roosenburg said he finds fault with that tactic.

"It's a bad thing," he said. He said that the purchased turtles may carry diseases, or could have a hard time adapting to life after being transplanted from another part of the bay. Turtles from the southern bay might have learned to eat snails, for instance, and might have difficulty in an area where the most prevalent turtle food is clams, Roosenburg said.

Another worry is that Whilden's mass purchasing of turtles might actually be encouraging watermen to catch more. She disputes that theory, saying she's been assured by turtle dealers that they could find buyers elsewhere.

Whilden and the scientists do agree on one thing: More turtles could be saved by further limiting the terrapin harvest in Maryland. Howard King, the director of Maryland's Fisheries Service, said he is considering a proposal that would do that.

For what it's worth, the turtles have a determined ally in the State House. Del. Virginia P. Clagett (D-Anne Arundel) proposed a "Diamondback Terrapin Day" during the last legislative session. It didn't pass, a defeat Clagett blames on its submittal late in the session.

Clagett said she will submit the bill again, hoping for a day when Marylanders would contemplate the terrapin's fate.

"I think it's important just to get it in front of people," Clagett said.

As for the Baltimore oriole, scientists say its numbers are also in decline: A national bird survey estimated that its U.S. population has shrunk about 1.1 percent each year since 1980.

But, in this case, the causes for its decline here are not all local. Despite its stature in this area, the oriole spends only about two to four months here during the spring and early summer. It spends the rest of the year in Central and South America.

"It's our state bird, but in some ways, we don't have a right to claim it," said Kevin Omland, a professor who studies orioles at the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

The oriole faces most of its troubles in its southern home, said Keith L. Pardieck, a wildlife biologist at the U.S. Geological Survey.

"They are a forest/parkland type of bird," Pardieck said, and can't compete when forests there are turned into farms.

For now, the Baltimore oriole continues to visit most of Maryland -- though not so much in Anne Arundel. Omland said the Baltimore species prefers inland areas, which in the Washington area usually means west and north of Interstate 95. Hot spots to sight Baltimore orioles are at the Monocacy National Battlefield in Frederick, near the C&O Canal and near Omland's office on the UMBC campus.

In Anne Arundel, the orchard oriole, a cousin to the Baltimore species, is more common. It has chestnut or maroon coloring on its chest, Omland said, where the Baltimore species has its distinctive orange patch.

In the long run, the biggest threat to orioles in Maryland could be global warming. As temperatures rise, the birds could begin seeking cooler climes to the north. The idea of Maryland without Baltimore orioles was raised in a scientific report several years ago, but experts say it isn't likely to happen soon.

"You're talking about 100 years from now," said Jeff Price, a professor at California State University, Chico, who worked on the study. The oriole was chosen mainly because of the bird's iconic status, he said. "It's a nice sound bite, but it's not pressing immediately."

So what about state's other famous non-human mascots? The raven, which inspired the name of Baltimore's pro football team, happens to be doing quite well. Omland said the bird is making a comeback in the mountains of western Maryland and is now being seen farther east.

And what of the UMBC mascot, the Chesapeake Bay retriever? Doing just fine, thanks. Statistics kept by the American Kennel Club show that this breed of dog -- developed for hunting around the Chesapeake in the 1800s -- ranked 46th of 154 recognized breeds last year in terms of popularity.

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