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*From the Baltimore Sun*

## Farm points way out of turtle trap

### Amid new curbs on catching turtles, Rodney Lewis raises lots of his own

By Tom Pelton  
Sun reporter

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PRESTON -- Hundreds of tiny green heads peek from a manmade pond behind Rodney Lewis' farmhouse on the Eastern Shore. As he approaches, the eyes watch him warily, then vanish into the murk.

Lewis, a 59-year-old waterman, has transformed himself into the terrapin king. Over the last year, he used a bulldozer to dig five large holding tanks in former cornfields, and he's stocked the ponds with more than 2,000 diamondback terrapin. He's created Maryland's only turtle farm -- breeding tens of thousands of hatchlings for sale for food or pets in China and elsewhere.

"They are a little bit shy," he said, pointing to turtles wobbling down a weedy bank and plopping into water the color of chocolate milk. "Right now, turtles seem to be the best avenue for revenue."

Lewis figures aquaculture is the best way a lifelong turtle-trapper like him can adapt to the growing restrictions in Eastern states. Starting today, it is illegal in Maryland to catch terrapin from November through July. The measure specifically prohibits dredging up the turtles as they hibernate for the winter in the mud on the bottom of the [Chesapeake Bay](#).

Some conservationists and legislators are pushing for a year-round ban on catching the proud symbol of Maryland, urging the state to follow the examples of Massachusetts, North Carolina and Georgia.

Terrapin are unique because they're the only turtle in the U.S. that can survive in the brackish mixture of salt and fresh water found in the [Chesapeake Bay](#).

Growing up to a foot in length and living for up to half a century, the turtles are called "diamondback" because of the raised patterns on their shells. They have black-and-white spotted necks, webbed feet with claws (which they use to dig up mollusks), and an ability to hibernate for months under mud without breathing or eating.

The species survived near-extinction during a turtle soup craze a century ago, then partially rebounded,

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according to a new book *Diamonds in the Marsh*, by biologist Barbara Brennessel. But now the "terps" are once again on a losing streak. They are being killed by a growing appetite in China for Chesapeake turtles and by waterfront development that is paving beaches the turtles need for nesting.

"The broader fate of the species does not look promising," Brennessel wrote. "This meek turtle is being threatened from all directions, land and sea. Scientists, naturalists and conservation minded-citizens ... are taking action to prevent the decimation of our only brackish water turtle."

Lewis, who has been catching terrapin since he was a kid and fondly remembers eating turtle pot pie baked by his grandmother, sees the writing on the wall.

"I don't really want the state to institute a ban on terrapin catching," he said. "But if the state does ban them, and I'm the only turtle farmer in Maryland, the value of my turtles would go up."

The state's new regulations - designed to help save Maryland's official state reptile --appear to be encouraging more trapping, according to watermen.

Regulations that took effect Aug. 1 prohibit catching terrapin longer than seven inches, protecting larger, breeding-age females. But a little-discussed part of the rules also allows the trapping of smaller turtles, from four to six inches, which until August were off-limits.

This change allows males, which are smaller than females, to be caught for the first time. "The new regulations caused a spike in people going after the diamondbacks," Lewis said.

As soon as the catching of smaller turtles was legalized this summer, Lewis said, he bought 5,000 terrapin from other watermen -- and quickly resold 2,500 to a turtle dealer in Louisiana, who shipped them to China and elsewhere for food and breeding.

Kurt Pittman, a waterman from Princess Anne who also catches turtles, said the new size and season limits have doubled the price of terrapins, to about \$5 each. "There weren't but a handful of us catching turtles before this," said Pittman. "Now more people are getting into the business, and that means more pressure on the turtles."

Fewer than 10 watermen in Maryland admitted catching terrapin last year, according to the [Maryland Department of Natural Resources](#). But that number tripled to 32 this summer, when the state imposed the new regulations and required a special terrapin license, state records show.

Howard King, director of fisheries programs at the department, said the state never meant to stimulate more terrapin harvesting. "That was unintended," King said of the growing market for smaller turtles. "We have heard that the taking of small terrapins is fostering a pet trade, and we don't want that."

He said his agency might clamp down after it gets reports this winter on the number of terrapins caught. He said it's unclear if the number of turtle catchers has risen or if more people are simply admitting to trapping.

Marguerite Whilden, a former state fisheries planner who runs a nonprofit group called the Terrapin Institute, said Lewis' new turtle farm -- and his ability to buy thousands of wild terrapin over the summer - - shows that the state's new regulations have backfired. "That's a huge mistake, to allow that type of wildlife farming on a huge scale," Whilden said.

She is pushing a moratorium on catching all terrapin, a measure proposed by state Del. Virginia Clagett last spring. A task force of experts assembled by former Gov. Parris N. Glendening in 2001 suggested a moratorium, but the Ehrlich administration instead imposed the current regulations.

Don Webster, a University of Maryland agriculture specialist, said the state should encourage breeding operations like Lewis' because they could boost turtle populations and help struggling watermen.

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"Aquaculture takes pressure off the natural resource, and provides the product at times when it's not available from the wild," Webster said.

Although Lewis has the only turtle farm in Maryland, he's not the state's first terrapin magnate.

In 1887, a Crisfield turtle rancher named Albert T. Lavallette Jr. used marketing savvy and a recipe for Caribbean turtle soup to transform terrapin from a food eaten only by slaves and Indians into a delicacy on the menus of East Coast restaurants, according to an article in [Chesapeake Bay Magazine](#).

A University of Maryland football coach, Crisfield native Curley Byrd, nicknamed his team the terrapins in 1932 after his region's famous reptile. Then the industry collapsed, rising again only recently.

Although the main market for food today is China, diamondbacks are also sold as pets in the U.S. over the Internet, and terrapin soup is still served in at least one local dining room, the Maryland Club in Baltimore.

Lewis gave a tour of his reptilian plantation on a recent morning, showing off the 50-acre farm where his grandfather once slaughtered hogs to make scrapple. He walked around the ponds containing not only about 2,200 terrapin, but also 1,300 snapping turtles, 3,000 eastern painted turtles and about 400 red-bellies.

Lewis kicked the chicken wire ringing the largest lagoon, then stepped back. A huge snapping turtle, bristling with horns, bumps and dried mud, shot out its long neck. The pink mouth gaped like a snake's, and its beak snapped near his boot.

He laughed. "I like snappers so much, my wife tells me I'm like a snapping turtle."

He picked up a smaller terrapin. Its horny jaw seemed to bend into a smile. "These are pretty gentle turtles, the diamondback," he said.

Beside his cinderblock barn is a pile of turtle traps, fashioned from metal hoops and netting. Inside is a small hatchery, built from plywood, with shelves, stacks of clear plastic boxes, electric baseboard heaters and an air conditioner.

He said his wife this spring dug scores of pinkish-white, leathery terrapin eggs from the mud around the pond. Then she placed them in the plastic containers, which the couple kept warm until they hatched.

"We are sending the babies to China -- thousands and thousands and thousands," Lewis said.

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