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photo courtesy of The Terrapin Institute

What's this? says tagged terrapin to camper Zoe, proving that terrapins put a cute and friendly face on Bay restoration.

by Carrie Steele

Sharing the Bay celebrity of crabs, oysters and Bay grasses is the diamondback terrapin, the newest poster child for Bay restoration.

We've all seen a blue crab, and an oyster — though scarce — is no mystery. But terrapins have kept a low profile, hiding out in marshy areas and quietly surviving in Bay shallows and tributaries.

Now these secretive reptiles are basking in the spotlight of environmental restoration projects, and with the help of local conservationists, terrapins have risen to notoriety as an up-and-coming Bay spokes-species.

Out of the Marsh and into the Soup

Malaclemys terrapin, or diamondbacks, have for eons resided in brackish marshes and tidal creeks from Cape Cod down the East Coast, around the Florida Keys and across the Gulf Coast to western Texas. As the only turtle in the world to inhabit solely brackish waters, diamondbacks are perfectly at home in the shallows of the Chesapeake Bay estuary and its tidal waters.



They hibernate in the mud during winter and emerge in late May to mate and lay eggs on sandy summer shores.

Unlike sea turtles, who maneuver through deeper waters with fins, terrapins prefer the shallow inlets along the coast and use their webbed feet to both swim and climb on logs for basking. These water-loving creatures leave their element only for soaking in the sun or for nesting. They build nests to hold their pinkish-white eggs above the high tideline on sandy shorelines. Both nests and hatchlings are vulnerable on the beach.

There, terrapins are prey — especially in their juvenile stage — to crabs, crows, gulls, rats, muskrats, foxes, raccoons and skunks. Terrapins are also predator, for these carnivores feed on aquatic snails, crabs, insects, fish and small bivalves

To help them tear their fishy meals, the turtles have beak-like mouths and long claws. Between claws and shell, their speckled salt-and-pepper skin bears marks as unique to each turtle as a fingerprint to a human. Tan-brown to gray-black shells bearing their namesake diamond pattern on plates called scutes grow in concentric rings, forming a tough exterior.

Their toughness makes mature terrapins a dish you'd have to work at getting. So terrapins' most troublesome predator is humans.

Terrapin soup isn't as popular as it used to be, but terrapins have long been trapped by watermen and sold for food. To catch a terrapin you need a permit, and you can trap them legally only August through April, when there is no upper limit on how many terrapins you can take. However, a caught terrapin's underside shell, or plastron, must be at least six inches long. If you've got a keeper, it's likely a mature female, since the males are generally smaller. Watermen hoist the turtles aboard from fishing nets.

Even today, terrapin supporters worry that taking too many females could create problems for turtle populations.

Bob Evans, a longtime Southern Anne Arundel waterman who was involved with the state terrapin program and who now lobbies for the Maryland Watermen's Association, used to catch terrapins to sell. He has since focused on fish and crabs. "People don't catch many terrapins commercially anymore," he says.



Terrapins live in the water but must surface periodically for air.

They come ashore to lay eggs, from which hatchlings emerge in about 60 days.



Accidental catches are down, too, since the 1999 law that required turtle excluder devices for crab pots to help prevent accidental turtle fatalities. Turtles can only survive a few hours completely underwater, so keeping them out of crab pots helps terrapins and makes more room for crabs. Evans helped design the Bay version of the excluders, known as TEDs, which are used worldwide to prevent accidental catches of turtles of all sorts.

These turtle excluders are a thick wire bent into a rectangle strip and secured with hog rings at the narrow end of the crab pot's funnel. Only four inches long and an inch and a half high, this metal rectangle is too small for the convex-shell of turtles. But thinner crabs easily can scuttle through.

"We used to find them in our crab pots, and then we'd release them," said Kenneth Keen, a former waterman now at DNR. "Once they started putting in TEDs, that helped a lot."

Terrapin eggs are also protected by law from harvesting or tampering.

Nowadays when terrapins appear on the market, turtle supporters often buy them to return them to the wild. An adult terrapin usually sells for about \$6, says Marguerite Whilden, co-founder of The Terrapin Institute, who reports that she bought the same terrapin three times. "I could tell by the small notch left on the turtle where our tag had fallen out," she said.

The Terrapin Institute wants the turtles to be common Bay citizens once again. But right now, neither they nor anybody else knows just how many terrapins are out there.

"We don't have a lot of good, quantified data," said fisheries biologist Martin Gary at the Department of Natural Resources. Lacking a terrapin management program, the best sources of information DNR has are nesting data it's collected, University of Maryland studies and estimates made along the Patuxent River in documenting the Chalk Point oil spill of 2001.

Anecdotal evidence points to terrapin survival as well. "Field biologists give feedback throughout the Bay that indicates that terrapins are fairly routinely encountered," says Gary.

Hoping to find answers to many terrapin questions, researchers have begun tagging female

terrapins with small metal bands bearing an identification number in order to get an idea of how many terrapins are out there and where these terrapins go.

Restoration's New Poster Critter

Terrapins have found their place in the spotlight as the ideal symbol of the Chesapeake — a segue between water and land, since they live mostly in the water but breathe air and come ashore for basking and nesting.

University of Maryland's athletic teams took the terrapin as their mascot in 1933, and Testudo has since become famous. In 2002, when the University of Maryland's men's basketball Terps won the NCAA championship, the school's athletic department donated part of the proceeds of their Fear the Turtle merchandise to diamondback research and conservation.

Terrapins have found sanctuary under the law as well as fame in sport. In 1994, diamondback terrapins were named Maryland's state reptile. In April 2001,

