

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2006 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 297 (Delegate V. Clagett, *et al.*)
Health and Government Operations Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

State Government - Diamondback Terrapin Day

This bill requires the Governor each year to proclaim May 13 as Diamondback Terrapin Day.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Establishing an official day to honor the diamondback terrapin would not affect State finances.

Local Effect: None.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Current Law: The diamondback terrapin is the official State reptile and the mascot of the University of Maryland, College Park.

Background: Diamondback terrapins live in coastal salt marshes, estuaries, and tidal creeks along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to western Texas and the Florida Keys. The diamondback terrapin is the only species of turtle in North America that spends its life in brackish water (salty but less so than sea water). Diamondback terrapins are well adapted for eating hard-shelled prey including aquatic snails, crabs, and blue mussels. They also eat fish, marine worms, and plant material.

Diamondback terrapins produce about 40 eggs per year and do not reach maturity until a minimum of eight years of age. Survival rates during the first year are estimated as low

as 20%. The low reproductive potential of terrapins indicates that females must reproduce for many years in order for the population to grow or remain stable. The diamondback terrapins can live beyond 50 years.

Significance of May 13

Mid-May is when the diamondback terrapins start to nest and are visible when surveying beaches.

Current Threats to Diamondback Terrapins

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources is currently studying the number of diamondback terrapins living in the Chesapeake Bay. In some areas, the diamondback terrapins appear to be in decline due to various factors including destruction of nesting beaches, excessive predation by raccoons, and large-scale commercial harvesting whereby the diamondback terrapins are killed and sold for food. In addition, many diamondback terrapins drown in eel and crab pots. These deaths are preventable by equipping pots with specified devices as required by Maryland law. Moderate trapping efforts on or near a nesting beach can destroy 95% of a nesting population within one or two years. Finally, the demand for turtles and terrapins as a food source in Asia has significantly increased the commercial harvest of these species.

Maryland Diamondback Terrapin Task Force

A task force was established by former Governor Glendening in 2001 for the purpose of evaluating the diamondback terrapins current population and developing strategies to protect and preserve the species. Members of the task force prepared a report and submitted it to the Secretary of Natural Resources on September 20, 2001. The task force made 18 recommendations including (1) establishing an immediate moratorium on the commercial harvest of the diamondback terrapins in Maryland; (2) funding a population assessment of the diamondback terrapin; (3) identifying and protecting terrapin nesting beaches throughout the tidewater regions of Maryland; (4) enacting shoreline management policies that take into consideration critical habitat for terrapin nesting; and (5) establishing May 13 as Diamondback Terrapin Day.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: An identical bill, HB 1565 of 2005, was referred to the Health and Government Operations Committee, where no action was taken.

Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Department of Natural Resources, National Aquarium in Baltimore, Department of Legislative Services

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