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## Turtle Derbies: A Race Our Turtles (and Children) Can't Win



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Every summer in small towns across America, children search woods and waters for turtles to compete in annual turtle races, longstanding traditions that often raise money for important causes.

But our nation's turtles are now dying off at alarming rates never-before seen, and it's time to end this tradition, which threatens to spread deadly diseases to both wild turtles and children.

After the races are over, most people release their turtles into the wild, undoubtedly thinking that no harm has been done. But races can expose turtles to disease, which then can spread to wild populations when turtles are released.

Threats like overexploitation and habitat loss have caused dramatic population declines in almost all U.S. turtle species, with many now either protected as endangered under the Endangered Species Act or under consideration for such protection. A new and emerging threat is a deadly wildlife disease called ranavirus that has caused turtle, frog and salamander die-offs in more than 25 states.

Ranavirus infection has been confirmed in Maryland in wild eastern box turtles, a popular entrant for turtle races in the Northeast. One confirmed case of the disease showed up last summer in Harford County, home of the Bel Air Annual Turtle Derby -- one of Maryland's largest turtle races.

Turtle races can also spread Salmonella to people who handle turtles, including young children who can become severely ill or even

die. Salmonella are naturally occurring bacteria in turtles, and infected turtles usually do not appear sick in any way.

That's why the Center for Biological Diversity has asked the sponsor of the annual turtle race in Bel Air, Maryland to stop using wild caught turtles. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources also issued a statement advising against using wild caught turtles in races.

Despite the risks, the Bel Air Turtle Derby has explained that they will go ahead with their turtle race as planned on the Fourth of July. But hopefully this year will be the last time that wild turtles are used.

Turtle races strain native turtle populations that are already under terrible pressure from habitat loss, road kill and other threats. In fact, a recent study found that nearly half of all turtle species are at risk of extinction. Some turtle species have lost more than 95 percent of their historic habitat.

While many of the threats facing wild turtles are difficult problems to solve, the threat posed by turtle races has an easy fix: just stop using wild caught turtles.

Many small towns across the country have replaced their turtle races with wildlife-friendly festivals that use creative substitutes for wild caught turtles, such as river races using rubber turtles or races where people pull toy turtles on strings.

The John Hopkins Turtle Race in Baltimore does not use any wild caught turtles, instead racing turtles brought in from U.S. turtle farms, to which the turtles are returned.

For generations, that magical moment when many a child first understood our bond with all things wild was kindled by staring into the eyes of a small turtle as it crawled across their outstretched hand.

That bond now requires that we put our own traditions aside and do what's best for our turtles, before it's too late.