



End turtle derbies for animals', humans' sake, activists, experts say

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Turtle derbies are almost as old as the republic, and still a staple in Maryland, a state that loves its terrapins. But conservationists and wildlife biologists say it's time to end this tradition, for the sake of the animals supposedly being celebrated.

Warning of the risk of spreading diseases to both wild turtles and children, local, state and national conservation groups have called on organizers of Bel Air's Fourth of July festivities to cancel their annual turtle derby, one of the largest held in the state.

The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity sent a letter Friday to the Bel Air Kiwanis Club, sponsor of the derby, saying it poses a threat to struggling native turtle populations and a health hazard to the children handling the animals. The group's concerns echo those raised earlier by local herpetologists, the Susquehannock Wildlife Society, and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

"This is not what you want to be doing if you want to have turtles around for the next generation," said Richard Seigel, a Towson University biology professor who studies amphibians and reptiles.

Animal welfare worries have been heightened by the recent rise in ranaviruses, which the National Wildlife Health Center says has caused turtle, frog and salamander die-offs in more than 25 states.

All confirmed cases of ranaviral infection in wild Eastern box turtles, a popular derby entrant, are from Maryland, according to the wildlife health center. Ranavirus has been found in box turtles in five Maryland counties, including one confirmed case last year in Harford County, near Havre de Grace, said Scott A. Smith, a state wildlife ecologist.

"We're a big red dot on the map for ranavirus and we don't understand why," Seigel said.

"We do not have information that the disease is spread by derbies," Seigel acknowledged, but scientists don't know how it's transmitted. So under those circumstances, he added, "the downside risk is very high."

Organizers say they have no plans to call off the derby, at least not this year. The day-long Independence Day celebration, begun in 1963, which also features a parade, fireworks and frog-jumping contest, is one of the most heavily attended events of its kind in Maryland.

Don Stewart, president and chairman of the Bel Air Independence Day Committee Inc., the nonprofit community group that runs the Bel Air celebration, told The Aegis that he did not necessarily disagree with the Center for Biological Diversity's position, but the volunteer organizers did not have enough time to consider stopping the event.

"We do our best to keep as safe as possible," he said. "It's a long tradition. It predates us. It's not anything new and our understanding of animals has increased over the years."

Stewart added that critics "definitely have a point," but said it wasn't possible to alter long-planned activities on short notice.

Smith and local herpetologists contend that they met with the Bel Air organizers in February to air their concerns, which included the risks of frogs being infected or hurt during the jumping event. They said they offered to stage an alternative event, with children encouraged to dress up as turtles and frogs and race themselves. They said they got no response to inquiries, until they were told a few weeks ago that the events would go forward as usual.

Attempts to reach Stewart and other event organizers about the groups' offer were unsuccessful.

"We no longer need to cause distress to animals to be entertaining to the kids," said Sandy Barnett, former herpetologist at the National Aquarium.

The state Department of Natural Resources issued a statement Tuesday urging Marylanders to race only pet turtles and not to release any into the wild.

The agency noted the risks of spreading disease among animals and to people, citing findings by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that salmonella infections have been linked to handling turtles and frogs.

"We've encouraged them to be strict with the way they hold it," said Jonathan A. McKnight, associate director of the wildlife and heritage service.

While derby organizers defend them as a traditional activity that familiarizes youngsters with wildlife, McKnight noted there are other traditional entertainments involving animals that have long since gone out of style.

"Everyone knows it shouldn't really go on anymore, and it should have ended a long time ago," said Scott McDaniel, president of the Susquehannock Wildlife Society, a local conservation group.

Many other communities have replaced turtle races with creative substitutes, the Center for Biological Diversity noted in its letter. Johns Hopkins Hospital, which claims to have been holding an annual turtle derby for 82 years, now uses animals brought in from domestic turtle farms.

Baltimore city's Department of Recreation and Parks, which has been holding the Chesapeake Turtle Derby every year since 1941, plans to go ahead July 13 with this year's in Patterson Park. Bob Wall, acting city chief of recreation, said the city has worked with the Mid-Atlantic Turtle and Tortoise Society to screen out visibly ill animals and to make the event less stressful for them.

Most of the turtles and tortoises raced in the city event are pets, Wall said. He said he was unaware of the ranavirus concerns, and of the state's recommendation to stop racing wild turtles.

"If that's what we've got to do, I guess ... we should just do it for pets," he said.