

THE CURRENT



Florida conservationists propose a petition to save drowning turtles

By Celina Ceballos, Science Editor
Feb 21, 2020

On Jan. 28, a group of scientists and leaders in conservation presented a petition to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) to require bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) on all commercial and recreational crab pots to help preserve a coastal turtle species: the diamondback terrapin.

Various turtle enthusiasts are in support of the petition on Eckerd's campus, including junior environmental studies major Daniel Roselli.

"They are, in my opinion, the most beautiful species of turtle," Roselli said. "They are the sweetest friendliest little boogers [...] I want to protect them."

The diamondback terrapin, *Malaclemys terrapin*, is the only type of turtle found strictly in estuarine ecosystems, primarily coastal marshlands.

According to Assistant Professor of Biology Jeffrey Goessling, the terrapins evolved from being freshwater turtles to return back to the marine environment.

"They're a kind of really unique evolutionary group," Goessling said. "They're worth saving from that natural history story."

Diamondback terrapins' habitat ranges from the northeast coast of the U.S. in Massachusetts down around the Florida peninsula to Texas.

"They're just really special," Goessling said. "They fill a niche that is otherwise non-existent globally."

Although they are not listed as endangered nationally by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, various states list them as a species of concern, but Florida does not. They face many challenges that have greatly limited their numbers over decades, including habitat loss due to coastal development, illegal poaching, sea-level rise, roadkill and bycatch mortality in crab trap pots.

"Definitely crab traps are one of the leading causes of unnatural death in adults," Goessling said.

The BRDs are small, plastic and cheap squares that are placed in the holes of the crab pots. These devices allow crabs to pass into the trap but not terrapins, greatly reducing bycatch of the turtles while still catching the desired crabs.

“While it may cut into [crab fishermen’s] profit margin in a very, very small way, they have an obligation that they’re using a shared resource,” Goessling said. “And so they have to use it in a way that benefits the broader common good, more than just their own profits.”

The Center for Biological Diversity, Florida Turtle Conservation Trust and Diamondback Terrapin Working Group proposed to the FWC that BRDs be required on all commercial and recreational crab pots in Florida. The petition details many examples of research in various states that show the benefits for the terrapins and fishermen.

“In general, the lasting effect that it has is really big,” Goessling said. “So, there are few reasons to not push for it.”

This petition would make Florida the fifth state to require BRDs on crab pots, following New York and New Jersey, which also require BRDs on both commercial and recreational, and Delaware and Maryland, which require BRDs on recreational crab pots only.

“It’s essentially a way that will allow Florida’s [...] law related to wildlife conservation to really be caught up with where the science is,” Goessling said. “It’s kind of the norm or the standard.”

According to the petition and its cited studies, BRDs can provide a 70% or greater reduction in terrapin capture. When terrapins swim into the crab pots, it is difficult for them to escape to swim to the surface to breathe, leading them to drown long before a fisherman pulls the crab pot.

“It’s really important that people actually care because, otherwise, we will not have them anymore,” Roselli said.

Another major issue involves so-called “ghost traps,” crab pots that have been abandoned or moved due to weather but still exist in the turtles’ habitat. These can have extreme impacts on the turtles since it can kill a greater number of terrapins in a shorter amount of time, according to the petition.

“They can catch an absolutely decimate a population,” Roselli said. “It targets either juveniles or males because males are smaller than the females, so they can fit into the traps.”

The FWC is currently reviewing the petition. According to Field Biologist and Boyd Hill Nature Preserve Employee George Heinrich, one of the contributors to the petition, the FWC has 30 days after they submitted the petition to make a decision. In this case, they have until Feb. 28.

“We consider it to be the most immediate conservation action that the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission could do to help diamondback terrapins,” Heinrich said. “We certainly hope that they’ll do the right thing.”

This is not a petition that requires signatures, but if students want to get involved, they can write letters or emails to the FWC. They can visit the Florida Conservation Trust Facebook for more information and more ways to get involved.

“If we can’t do something so simple and so effective to protect one of the most personable, beautiful species of turtle that we can, [...] it sort of is very damaging to the outlook for some more important, harder-to-gain-support-for species,” Roselli said. “People don’t even know what they’re missing out on.”