

City Sierran

The Urban Naturalist

Babette Puts Tasty Turtles in Hot Water

by Steven D. Garber

Must every tasty turtle species be eaten to extinction? *The New York Times* recently provided a recipe for turtle soup, complete with information on where to buy the animals. (March 2, 1988, in "Babette, a Great Feast for the Palate and the Eye," page C6) This endorsement of the consumption of diamondback terrapins, a "species of special concern" according to the State of New York, underscores a major problem.

(The *Times* article referred to a meal depicted in the motion picture *Babette's Feast*, which won an Academy Award as the best foreign language film.)

Sales of these small turtles have been increasing for several years, first in Chinatown. Now the turtles are becoming popular in fancy French and Italian establishments. Unable to withstand such sustained pressure, diamondback populations are feeling the pinch.

Generations after diamondback terrapins were "fished out," they finally recovered to the point that fishermen and baymen were catching enough to send to market. Although many Americans had lost their taste for turtle meat, Asian Americans continued to eat it. At one time, though, most of the turtles being bought were imported from Asia. But now, in the diamondback terrapin, gourmets have found an excellent-tasting, reasonably priced, North American equivalent to the Asian turtles. Turtle consumption is well on the rise again. In the past, it was considered very chic to eat green turtle soup (Winston Churchill ate it daily). Now, the turtles in demand are not sea turtles; rather, they are the little salt marsh turtles collected in estuaries from Cape Cod to the Gulf of Mexico.

There is no question that, once again, diamondback terrapins are in "hot water." The market is growing, the sales network is expanding, and restaurants continue to add this new item to their menus. With all these outlets, the baymen continue to rely on this supplement to their income. However, the diamondback terrapin's reproductive capacity cannot sustain such cropping for long, so the turtles will become increasingly scarce. This will push prices up, and the baymen will work harder to catch those that remain.

It would be alarming enough if diamondbacks were merely on the decline, but most populations in the Northeast have been wiped out twice already. Each time it took more than 100 years for the turtle population to recover to the point where it could sustain another brief boom. Our own population has increased so much that if we endanger the turtle population again it could be for the last time.

Of those Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts populations that were extirpated earlier in this century, few have recovered. To date, most of the recovered populations occur from New Jersey to the Carolinas, and that's where most of the current collecting occurs. These states protect their diamondbacks to varying extents with laws that are rarely adequately enforced. In New York, diamondback terrapins are listed as a "species of special concern," a classification that was intended to get the public's attention (though it seldom does). And now, with baymen taking full advantage of the turtles' unprotected status, even New York populations found along Long Island are being depredated.

I cannot say there's a simple solution. If New York were merely to change the turtle's status, this alone would have little effect, considering that New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation is insufficiently equipped to have much impact on matters falling within its jurisdiction. Though an organized, concerted effort might convince Albany to enact legislation intended to protect diamondbacks by making it illegal to sell any in this state, getting adequate DEC enforcement is an entirely different story.

If diamondbacks are going to survive, it will not be with inadequate law enforcement, a popular culture that encourages diamondback consumption, and with crabbers who continue to use crab traps that drown thousands of the diamondbacks each season. With diamondback terrapins already in a downward spiral, we would be well advised to take heed and, perhaps, even to do something about it.