

MARYLAND

ITS

RESOURCES, INDUSTRIES AND INSTITUTIONS

PREPARED FOR THE

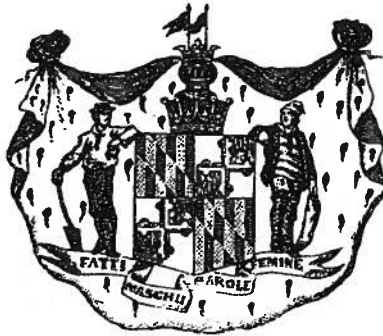
BOARD OF WORLD'S FAIR MANAGERS

OF MARYLAND

BY

MEMBERS OF JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

AND OTHERS



BALTIMORE

1893

THE DIAMOND-BACK TERRAPIN.

This small but expensive animal fills such a prominent place among the luxuries for which our State is famous that a few words upon the way our market is supplied will not be out of place, although only a small part of our supply comes from our own waters.

The diamond-backed terrapin, *Malacoclemmys palustris*, is found along our entire eastern coast from southern New England to Texas, wherever there are salt marshes, but it is most abundant in the low half-submerged country which fringes most of the sounds and tidal rivers from the Chesapeake Bay southward.

At one time these animals were so abundant that they could be seen sunning themselves on the sand-bars and sand-flats upon every warm day. Holbrook says they are so prolific that their numbers appear undiminished, notwithstanding their great destruction, but at present they are by no means abundant, and no one who does not devote himself to their pursuit is at all likely to meet with a single specimen.

The streams along the salt marshes of Maryland still furnish a few, but the supply for our market comes from the most part from southern waters—from the vicinity of Norfolk and from the eastern shore of Virginia and from still further south.

The habits of the diamond-back are much like those of our familiar pond terrapins. They are at home both on land and in the water, and during the summer months they are active and alert, wandering in search of their food, which consists of fish, crabs, marsh plants and algæ, and in fact of most of the animal and vegetable food which the marshes afford.

Early in the summer the female comes up at night on to a sandy shore or bar above the water and scoops out a shallow nest for her eggs, and the newly hatched young live for a time on land. As soon as cold weather approaches, the terrapin buries itself in the mud beyond the reach of frosts and sleeps until spring. During its active life in summer it cannot stay under water very long without coming to the top for fresh air, and it drowns like any other breathing animal when it is kept under water, but in its winter sleep breathing almost ceases, and the animals often bury themselves in the mud under water.

The methods of catching them vary according to the season. In summer a few are gathered by men and boys, who wade through the marshes and shallow waters, catching them in their hands or dipping them up with hand nets. At the present day the return is too scanty to support a child, and this method of catching terrapins is only the occupation of idle hours, for we must not estimate the earnings of these summer fishermen by the price which the city dealers charge their customers. There is no demand for terrapins in the summer, and those which are

caught in this way are sold at once to dealers who are able to wait until winter for a market, and the prices paid to the captors range from less than a dollar a dozen to as much, perhaps, in very favorable cases, as ten dollars a dozen.

Notwithstanding its proverbial indolence, the terrapin when at home in or near the water is a most active animal, wary and skillful at hiding and escaping, and the demand has led to many improved methods of catching them.

In North Carolina dogs are trained to hunt along the shores of the creeks for the tracks of terrapins which have come out of the water and to follow the trails into the marshes until they find the animals. The hunters also visit the sandy shores and bars at night with torches during the breeding season, and capture the terrapins as they come up to make their nests.

Terrapins are often caught by fishermen in their seines, and traps also are used, made after the fashion of a lobster pot, of coarse netting stretched over hoops, with a funnel-shaped opening at each end. These traps are baited with pieces of fish, and are set in favorable spots, but as a terrapin caught in a trap under water would drown, they are placed in shallow water or are fastened to stakes in such a way that part of the trap is above water to furnish a breathing space.

Those which are sent to market in the winter find a ready sale at high prices, and there are many ways of finding them in their burrows in the mud.

At Beaufort, North Carolina, the dry grass of the marshes is lighted after the terrapins have hid themselves for the winter, and as the ground grows warm they are awakened and come out of their burrows, when they are captured without difficulty.

Most of the supply is captured by means of terrapin "drags," constructed somewhat like a naturalist's dredge. In summer the animals are much too active to permit themselves to be caught in this way, but as colder weather sets in they become more helpless, and the drag is then an effective collector. It consists of a coarse bag, with large meshes which permit the mud to flow through them and to be washed away, and of a frame which forms the mouth of the bag and keeps it open. The lower side of this frame is a heavy bar of iron three or four feet long, set with large strong iron teeth, which rake the mud and scoop up the buried terrapins.

In the far south, where the winter's sleep is not perfect, they gather, in cold weather, in the mud at the bottoms of deep holes in the creeks, and they are captured in large seines, made for the purpose, four or five hundred feet long and eighteen or twenty wide, with coarse meshes.

One end of it is made fast to a stake, and it is then set, from a boat, in a circle, and the two ends are then brought together and rapidly drawn in to the boat. During the whole process the fishermen rap upon the sides or bottom of the boat with oars or sticks, as it is said that this noise causes the terrapins to rise from the bottom, and prevents them from diving under the net.

The terrapins which are gathered in the summer are kept in pounds, or inclosed pens, until winter, and are fed with fish and crabs. The high price and the gradual disappearance of the terrapins have led to efforts to rear them in inclosed pens, from the eggs, but these pens must be so large, to afford all the conditions which are necessary, that the protection of the eggs and young animals from their enemies is very difficult, and, as they grow so slowly that they are not ready for market for some six years, few persons have attempted to rear them.

Our waters contain many species of terrapins which, while they are not esteemed by our people, are elsewhere used as food, and it is an open secret that some of them are sometimes served as the real diamond-backs.

Small green turtles, or chicken turtles, as they are called, are quite frequently taken by fishermen in their nets, in the lower counties of Maryland, for while this animal is an inhabitant of the sea, it delights in the mouths of rivers, and often works its way inland to a great distance. It is a delicious article of food, but its occurrence in our waters is too irregular and infrequent to give it an established place among our resources.