

Marine Extension Specialists Work Towards Finding a Means to Exclude Turtles from Crab Traps

As a result of concern over high mortality of diamondback terrapins in the commercial crab fishery, The University of Georgia's Marine Extension Service (MAREX) recently completed a study examining the effectiveness of several terrapin excluder devices on crab traps. Funded by The Environmental Resources Network (T.E.R.N.), MAREX personnel examined five excluder devices in St. Simons and St. Andrew estuaries during the summers of 2003 and 2004.

The results of the terrapin excluder study will provide insight into what device(s) will help reduce encounters with diamondback terrapins and limit the effects on crab catches. Preliminary analyses have shown promise for three of the modifications. MAREX staff is working to obtain more funding for a third year of data collection, which would include the involvement of the commercial crabbing industry.

Diamondback terrapins are small estuarine turtles found from Maine to Texas that are associated with coastal marshes and small tidal creeks. In the early years of the 20th century, terrapins were commercially caught and harvested throughout their range and used in turtle soup. The fishery died out in later years mainly because of reduced numbers. Until 2003, diamondback terrapins were still a considered a commercial species in Georgia waters. Today, the main threats to terrapins are boat strikes, pollution, highway mortality during the egg laying season, and drowning in crab traps.

MAREX wants to provide the commercial crabbing industry with terrapin excluder devices that reduce turtle captures without reducing crab captures. Part of the second year's activities included using underwater video equipment in a controlled

environment to document the behavior of both crabs and terrapins. Thomas Shierling, a marine resources specialist with MAREX, believes the visible evidence will help lend credibility to the benefits of these devices. “We hope to convince the industry that these devices will work by providing some physical evidence. For most people, a picture is worth much more than numerical information,” states Shierling.

T.E.R.N. is a nonprofit organization that acts as the official “friends group” for Georgia’s Department of Natural Resources’ Non-game and Endangered Wildlife Program. TERN’s mission is to help with the financial support of the Non-game Program and its much-needed conservation projects. For more information about this project contact, Carolyn Belcher, UGA Marine Extension Service, 715 Bay Street, Brunswick, GA, 31520, phone: (912) 280-1586 or email: cbelcher@uga.edu.