

**Diamondback Terrapin Working Group Meeting: Gulf Coast Region
December 10, 2004
University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, MS**

In Attendance: J. Borden, J. Boundy, J. Butler, T. Floyd, L. LaClaire, G. Langford, T. Mann, K. Marian, T. Mohrman, D. Nelson, H. Perry, L. Timmerman and T. Wibbels.

Meeting Synopsis

I Establishment of a range-wide diamondback terrapin working group

Joe Butler spoke of the establishment and formation of the Diamondback terrapin Working Group. Goals and objectives for working group were discussed including . . .

- (1) Acquisition of demographic information of terrapin populations.
- (2) Identify local and range wide threats.
- (3) Maintain database of known terrapin populations.
- (4) Make recommendations for research.
- (5) Promote education.
- (6) Meet triennially.
- (7) Distribute information.

Additionally, the governance of the working group was discussed identifying the roles of officers and the duration of office terms. Other issues discussed included membership and dues, the establishment of the working group website, and continuation a triennial schedule for terrapin workshops.

II Research Overviews and Assessments

Discussion by state of the current status of terrapins by state and other research projects of significant importance by state representatives.

Alabama - Dave Nelson and Joel Borden

The University of South Alabama with funding from the Alabama Center for Estuarine Studies is finishing up a survey to identify populations of DBTs in western half of Mobile Bay in Alabama (Dave Nelson, Joel Borden and Gabe Langford). Joel spoke about a moderation of the turtle hoop trap they used (Herp. Rev. 31:158-160). Very few terrapins have been found to date and a few nests were documented on Barton Island.

Alabama - Ken Marion and Thane Wibbels

With funding from the same center they have been evaluating the eastern half of Mobile Bay. They have searched Dauphin Island, Graveline Bay to Airport Bay, Mon Louis Creek, and Cedar Point Marsh finding sporadic nesting and a few heads.

Mississippi - Tom Mann and Thomas Mohrman

Efforts to identify terrapin nesting habitat were made by Tom Mann approximately ten years ago in the form of a foot survey of the entire Mississippi coastline. He also used modified crab traps to survey and capture terrapins. His results are available in his Mississippi Museum of Natural Sciences Technical Report # 37, Jackson.

Current herpetofaunal surveys of Gulf Islands Nation Seashore (conducted by Mohrman et. al.) have not revealed the presence of DBT's, however a second year of survey work will begin in the new year. This second year will include Cat Island which has historically had nesting populations of terrapins.

Louisiana - Jeff Boundy

Terrapins are regulated as a game species in LA. Seasonal regulations that were set in the 1940's select for large adult females of 6 in. plastron length or more. The season lasts from mid-May through mid-April. It is recommended to push for setting a new size limit of 4 1/2 - 6 1/2 inches in order to protect reproductive females. It is also necessary to close the season while terrapins are nesting (likely mid-April through the end of July). Jeff related the sale of a "couple thousand" terrapins by a local fisherman in one recent event near Tario.

State marine fisheries trawl data could provide a reliable source of historical data. Due to the vast coastline and estuarine habitat in LA, terrapins may have very large undiscovered populations. Terrapins are not found in Lake Pontchartrain. Local watermen identify terrapins as being fairly localized in areas where they are to be caught. Ken Marian noted that in past years he has seen heads and nesting evidence at the Chandelours.

Texas - Mike Forstner (report read by T. Mohrman)

The Texas coast was surveyed between 1997-2000 primarily in order to obtain samples for population genetic work, and also to learn where populations may exist. Terrapins currently persist in Galveston, Lavaca, and Nueces bays. Further north along the coast, surveys of crabbers, shrimpers and fishermen revealed that "small" turtles were seen in the past (ten to twenty years) however were not seen in the last decade. Since 2000 surveys seem to have confirmed the absence of terrapins in Aransas Port A, and Sabine Pass. A single ghost pot in Galveston Bay was found with 40+ left plastron bridge elements, and other abandoned or storm tossed traps had shell fragments in them.

In 2004 Paul Crump of the Houston Zoo began a collaborative project with my (M. Forstner's) lab group and zoo staff to survey the upper coast and south of Galveston Bay to Baffin Bay. Active consumption in the Nueces and Lavaca bays by ethnic Vietnamese remains a concern, but is the only direct predation of which was known. We were able to locate populations in the 1997-2000 surveys that appear to represent workable numbers in Galveston and Nueces bays, the numbers in Lavaca are much smaller. Notably the protected bird islands and other generally inaccessible spots are where the turtles remain. We found two dead hatchlings this year in Galveston bay on a spoil island.

Otherwise the issue is the same as elsewhere, development concurrent to habitat and nesting beach loss is the bell ringer, then crab traps harvesting both during the use of the traps and after they have been lost and remain lethal to the turtles and crabs themselves. My first recommendation for that was that the design of crab traps be changed in two ways: 1) the openings modified as recommended by others to exclude terrapins and 2) to enforce one side of the trap itself being connected by bio degradable ties (steel or polystyrene cable ties even). The latter to allow the trap to fall one side out if lost, preventing continued deaths long after the storm has taken the trap from the fisherman.

Derelict crab trap removal program in the Gulf of Mexico - Harriet Perry

Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama have continuing derelict crab trap removal programs. Florida is just getting started. Last year Texas recovered 3500 traps, Louisiana 6600+, Mississippi 5000, and Alabama 375. These programs have been funded by NOAA's Habitat Restoration Program and the Coastal Impact Assistance Program. When the grants run out the states are picking up the bill.

III Round table discussion on regional issues

Based on questionnaires requested prior to the Jacksonville workshop both regional and local threats were identified. In Alabama, Mississippi and Texas mortality in crab pots was determined to be the most significant threat to terrapins. In Alabama the studies mentioned above will continue. It was suggested that that state should consider a ban on crab trapping in tidal creeks and bays (50 ft from shore). This, combined with use of BRDs would be a good tactic. In Mississippi we need to seek information from the Crab Task Force of which Harriet is a major player. Their surveys will be important. In Texas, at this point we will be relying on the new studies by M. Forstner and the Houston Zoo folks. In Louisiana, the most important issue to surface on the questionnaires is possible over-harvesting. Jeff will pursue rule changes for the size of terrapins and season of harvest mentioned before. He will also check with the Marine fisheries Division to see if historical seining data is available.

IV Upcoming Events

Dave Nelson agreed to present issues concerning terrapins to the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission March 14-17, 2005 at Point Clear, Alabama.

The next regional meeting is to be held at the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory (GCRL) located at Ocean Springs, MS in December of 2005. It will be hosted by Harriet Perry (GCRL) and coordinated by Thomas Mohrman (USM). An exact date currently has not been set for this December meeting.

Respectfully Submitted By
Thomas Mohrman, Regional Representative
Gulf Coast Region of the Diamondback Terrapin Working Group