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Florida Petition Seeks to Protect Diamondback Terrapin Turtles From Drowning in Crab Traps

TALLAHASSEE, Fla.— Conservation groups filed a [petition](#) today asking the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to adopt regulations that would protect diamondback terrapins from drowning in blue crab pots. These imperiled turtles are suffering population declines.

Diamondback terrapins, found along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Massachusetts to Texas, are the only turtles in the world that live exclusively in coastal estuaries. These estuaries are also home to blue crabs, which are trapped in crab pots by an active blue crab fishery.

“Terrapins are needlessly drowning in crab pots, and there’s a simple solution,” said Elise Bennett, a Center attorney who focuses on protecting reptiles and amphibians. “We’re asking state wildlife officials to protect our turtles so Floridians and visitors can enjoy them for years to come.”

The petition, filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, Florida Turtle Conservation Trust and Diamondback Terrapin Working Group, asks the state to require bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) on all recreational and commercial blue crab pots. When affixed to crab-pot entrance funnels, these small and inexpensive devices prevent most terrapins from entering the pot while having little to no effect on crab haul.

Baited blue crab pots are known to trap and drown terrapins, while fleets of traps are capable of steadily removing individual turtles until a population cannot sustain itself. Abandoned or lost traps — called ghost pots — can capture terrapins by the dozen.

A 2009 study reported finding 133 dead terrapins among two abandoned crab pots in a tidal marsh in Georgia. Experts agree that blue crab pots pose the greatest threat to the diamondback terrapin.

In a [2007 study](#), Dr. Joe Butler and George Heinrich tested BRDs in Florida waters and found that 73.2% of trapped terrapins would have been excluded from pots with the devices. The researchers found no significant difference between the sex, measurements, or number of crabs captured in standard crab pots when compared with crab pots fitted with BRDs. At least eight other studies from across the terrapin’s range have reached similar results.

“Mortality due to bycatch in crab pots is a major threat to diamondback terrapins throughout their range,” said George L. Heinrich, executive director of the Florida Turtle Conservation Trust, field biologist and environmental educator. “Regulatory change requiring BRDs on commercial and recreational crab pots used in Florida waters would be the greatest immediate conservation action that could be implemented by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.”

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List ranks the diamondback terrapin’s global status as [vulnerable](#) and describes its population trend as decreasing. Threats to the species include habitat destruction and degradation, road mortality, crab-pot mortality, sea-level rise caused by global climate change, pollution, boat strikes, predation, collection for commercial and personal purposes and inadequate regulatory measures to address these threats.

“As human beings, it is our moral responsibility to protect and conserve our environments and the organisms that inhabit them,” said Dr. Joe Butler, cofounder of the Diamondback Terrapin Working Group and professor of biology at the University of North Florida. “When we can clearly see that our interactions with nature are causing harm, such as diamondback terrapins drowning in our man-made crab traps, it only makes sense to correct this. We created the problem and only we can fix it.”

If Florida required BRDs, it would join New York and New Jersey, which require bycatch reduction devices on recreational and commercial pots, and Delaware and Maryland, which require the devices on recreational pots. North Carolina is currently considering measures to reduce the effect of its crab fisheries on terrapins.

Background

The diamondback terrapin is known for its stunning diamond-patterned shell and speckled skin. It lives in coastal marshes, tidal creeks, mangroves and other estuarine habitats where it primarily feeds on snails, clams, mussels and small crabs. The terrapin is potentially a keystone species in salt marshes and mangroves, helping to maintain the ecological health of those ecosystems.

There are currently seven recognized subspecies of diamondback terrapin, and Florida is home to five (three of which only occur in Florida). Florida also has the most coastal habitat of all the states in the species’ range.



Diamondback terrapin. [Image is available for media use. Please credit: George L. Heinrich.](#)

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

The Florida Turtle Conservation Trust (FTCT) was formed in 1999 by a group of Florida biologists and conservationists concerned with the conservation of Florida turtles. The FTCT's purpose is to promote the conservation of all Florida turtle species and the preservation of intact, free-ranging populations and their associated ecosystems throughout the state of Florida. The FTCT is committed to and supports education, conservation, research, and management efforts with the above goals in mind.

The Diamondback Terrapin Working Group was formed in 2004 by individuals from academic, scientific, regulatory and private institutions/organizations working to promote the conservation of the diamondback terrapin, the preservation of intact, wild terrapin populations and their associated ecosystems throughout their range. The Diamondback Terrapin Working Group is committed to and supports research, management, conservation, and education efforts with the above goals in mind

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