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GREEN MOUNTAIN

Rare turtle finds its voice

Biologist leads a charge to save a species from predators - and from the humans who want them gone

BY CANDACE PAGE, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2010

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SWANTON — The morning sun burned hotly one day last week as biologist Steve Parren dug the wrong end of a paintbrush in a circle around a tiny escape hatch in a shale beach.

We'd come to this turtle nesting sanctuary at Lake Champlain's northeastern corner in search of just such little tunnels, a sign that hatchlings were emerging from the nest.

"Oh, shoot," Parren muttered in alarm. A creature the size of a quarter and the exact color of sandy gravel squirmed at the bottom of the hole where the paintbrush had struck it.

Parren plucked the newly hatched Eastern spiny softshell turtle, checked it for injuries and gently introduced it to its temporary home, a recycled Wilcox Dairy ice-cream tub.

This hatchling, at least, would get a helping hand in the harrowing, usually fatal, turtle journey toward adulthood.

"If this species is going to recover, it won't recover on its own," Parren had told me before our field trip. "I can give them a jump on most other turtles, but they still are just snack [food](#) for a lot of predators out there."

I hoped my morning with Parren would give me a snapshot of the sometimes extreme measures necessary to protect the locally rare softshell turtle, an ancient creature, a fast swimmer — and a political hot potato.

As a bonus, I came away with a picture of one biologist's dedication, and with an education in the biology of softshell turtles, their dangerous infancy, their 20th century decline and their surprising appeal despite a drab exterior and a really, really ugly nose.

'Who cares?'

To get to this beach — I promised not to reveal its precise location — Parren and I had to pass through three ranks of fences, one of them chest-high and one of them electric. The beach itself was covered with long mats of chicken wire laid on the ground.



EMILY McMANAMY, Free Press

Steve Parren of the Fish and Wildlife Department holds a map turtle that he has kept at his home to ensure its growth and safety before he releases it into a protected area in Missisquoi Bay.

State Is Home To Seven Turtle Species

By Candace Page, Free Press Staff Writer

Seven species of turtles can be found in Vermont, from the quite common snapping turtle to the endangered spotted turtle known from only two places in the state.

"I tell people, 'If you have been swimming anywhere outside a swimming pool in Vermont, you have been swimming with snapping turtles,'" said Jim Andrews of Salisbury. (A snapping turtle has powerful jaws, but the animals are not aggressive and usually avoid humans in the water.)

Andrews is a herpetologist, a biologist who specializes in amphibians and reptiles, and is the state's leading expert on those species. His list of Vermont turtles runs like this: snapping, spotted, spiny softshell, painted, wood, map and Eastern musk.

"On a grand scale, turtles are pretty popular critters," he said. "People generally like them, and compared to snakes, bats and wolves, they rarely get bad press."

Nevertheless, he said, humans are a danger to several species when development removes turtle habitat, or road-building turns a river valley into a killing ground for any turtle searching for food or moving from one body of water to another.

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The place was armored like Fort Knox, to protect a turtle that many bay residents wish would go away and stay gone.

Eastern spiny softshell turtles are included on [Vermont's](#) list of threatened species. They are a leathery-shelled, water-dwelling species with a long, brown nose like a tube. The Cyrano de Bergerac snout allows the turtle to stay submerged with only its nose sticking above the surface.

Although more common in the Midwest, softshell turtles in Vermont number just 200 to 300 and are found only in Missisquoi Bay and the Lamoille River. In Quebec, where the turtle also is a threatened species, it is found only in the Missisquoi watershed.

In the bay, softshells appear to rely on habitat created by the Vermont 78 causeway, the old link between Swanton and Alburgh. A big new bridge replaced the causeway in 2007, so it isn't needed except by turtles that bask there in autumn and submerge at its base in winter.

Residents ardently desire the causeway's removal in the belief that will increase water circulation, rebuild eroded beaches and improve their sometimes poor water quality. (Scientific models show that removing the causeway would improve water quality 1 percent.)

Claire Taplin, a summer resident of the bay for nearly 77 years, speaks for many of her neighbors. As she sat in the shade contemplating the soupy-looking bay last week she said, "Because of those turtles, we can't remove the causeway and take our bay back to what Mother Nature gave us originally."

As long as scientists conclude the causeway is important to the [health](#) of a threatened species, it's unlikely the entire causeway will be taken out. In fact, Fish and Wildlife Commissioner Wayne Laroche told me last week the state no longer plans to remove the causeway's western arm at all, because it is more important to the turtles. Removing the eastern arm someday should be sufficient to open up the bay, he said.

Taplin's neighbor Colin Gray has been summering on Missisquoi Bay since he was 6 months old. He remembers when the turtles were so common that children would dig them up and bring the eggs home to hatch. He's now 78. He nodded vigorously as Taplin spoke.

"It's a waste of [money](#) to help those turtles," he said. "They're not a threatened species in the U.S. Maybe in Vermont, sure, but who cares?"

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New est first



UseLogic802 wrote:
Replying to pro_con:

4thEstate wrote:

Gee, Pro_Con -

Re: "Let us be practical in caring for the survival of the snail darter, the spotted owl, minnows and turtles, but NOT at the expense of mankind and civilization!"

I think you've got that 'bass ackwards'

How so moonbat?

Suburban and rural subdivision also create "subsidized predators" — the raccoons, skunks and the like that flourish on human trash and human gardens.

"Then if we leave fewer and fewer pieces of nesting habitat, nests are concentrated in small areas. These predators figure it out," Andrews said — and they learn where to find an easy meal of turtle eggs.

Eastern spiny softshell turtle

• **LATIN NAME:** Apalone spinifera spinifera.

• **APPEARANCE:** Leathery, olive-gray shell; three-clawed webfoot; tubular snout.

• **RANGE:** Lakes, rivers from Midwest to Vermont.

• **STATUS:** Threatened in Vermont and Quebec. Once lived in the Winooski, Richelieu and St. Lawrence rivers, but no longer found there. Limited to Lake Champlain and the Lamoille River.

• **SIZE:** In Vermont, females range up to 16 inches and 10 pounds. Males are much smaller, up to 7 inches and 1 pound.

• **FOOD:** Mostly carnivorous, feeding on crayfish, water insects, mollusks, worms, tadpoles, frogs and other organisms.

• **BEHAVIOR:** Spends long periods basking in the sun, particularly in autumn. Spends winter buried in lake bottom with only head and neck protruding. Swims well and can range long distances.

• **LIFE CYCLE:** Hatch from eggs laid on gravel/sand beaches. Hibernate for six months each year. Can live for up to 50 or more years, but eggs and young turtles are subject to heavy predation.

Source: Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife



Are you saying that animals are more important than humans?

It certainly appears that way!

And if so, then you belong in the class of Malthusian/Environmentlist-Nazi-Like-Retards I referred to in my previous comments.

Give my regards to OWLGORE the next time you step into his church of the naive, true-believers and clueless Green Weenies to prostrate and worship at the altar of Mom Gaia!

Mmm, mmm, mmm!

Yes, because it would be awesome if only humans were left in the world. What a great world it would be. I'm sensing cannibalism in the future...

9/6/2010 12:53:43 PM

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gmexpress wrote:

Word has it that the moonbat, trode, has made a discovery of eastern spiny's near the proposed 12b exit in South Burlington. God help us.

9/6/2010 10:09:15 AM

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pro_con wrote:

4thEstate wrote:

Gee, Pro_Con -

Re: "Let us be practical in caring for the survival of the snail darter, the spotted owl, minnows and turtles, but NOT at the expense of mankind and civilization!"

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Mmm, mmm, mmm!

9/6/2010 9:01:47 AM

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swollen wrote:

Replying to goseabees1000:

If people tried to help homeless people half as much,the country would be in a better place.

Why not do both?

9/6/2010 8:53:44 AM

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goseabees1000 wrote:

If people tried to help homeless people half as much,the country would be in a better place.

9/6/2010 7:24:05 AM

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