Survey takes stock of diamondback terrapins

Rachael Pacella, DelmarvaNow

Annual state-wide survey seeks to answer questions about turtle populations in Maryland


(Photo: Staff Photo by Rachael Pacella)

There are questions surrounding the deaths of 37 northern diamondback terrapins near the Indian River Inlet.

Well, more like one question right now. What happened?

Dennis Bartow, a volunteer at the Delaware Center for the Inland Bays, made the discovery recently over several days. He was at a new beach that was formed by Hurricane Sandy, checking to see if it was good horseshoe crab spawning area.

He has sent one of the bodies up to a lab in Pennsylvania for a necropsy, which will hopefully provide some answers to the occurrence. Bartow also found more than 30 live terrapins in the area.

But when it comes to diamondback terrapins, there is a much larger question that needs to be answered: What does the area's population look like?

"There's not much known about their population and where they live," Maryland Coastal Bays Program Manager Jen Rafter said.

Fred Eckfeldt of Selbyville searches for diamondback terrapins in Assawoman Bay. (Photo: Staff Photo by Rachael Pacella)

That's why the group has participated in a state-wide survey through the Diamondback Terrapin Working Group for the past five years. The program coordinates a local effort that uses volunteers to count the number of turtles spotted on land and in the water from May 26 to May 30.

The count is held this time of year because terrapins are coming out of hibernation and are more likely to be in groups, Rafter said.

On May 27, Rafter led a group of volunteers, including Bartow, on a tour of the upper reaches of Assawoman Bay to try to find terrapins just south of the state line. Most of the volunteers were from Delaware.

The diamondbacks, named for the shape of spots on their shell, are hard to see from a boat — the only difference between a turtle's head poking out of the water and a stick is that the terrapin moves.

In general, it is difficult for a lot of people to identify terrapins, Rafter said. The turtles are highly variable in color, from light gray to black. The females are large, so smaller turtles are either males or immature females.

There is one giveaway, however, that can help people pick terrapins out from Maryland's other turtle species: Terrapins are the only ones that live in salty or brackish water, meaning a mix of fresh and salt water.

Rafter focused the search by boat on sheltered areas, which would be ideal for a terrapin. She also kept an eye out for sandy areas, because terrapins build their nests in the sand.

"Hardened shoreline is a problem," she said, looking at bulkheads and riprap on the bank.

Derelict crab pots, such as this one, can be a major hazard for terrapins. (Photo: Staff Photo by Rachael Pacella)

Another big problem for terrapins are "ghost" crab pots, or derelict crab pots that have been lost by watermen. The terrapins get caught in them and can't get out.

At the end of the day, 17 terrapins were spotted, but Rafter said reports from areas without terrapins are also helpful because it tells researchers where terrapins aren't.

"Zero is good data," she said. "It tells us where there are no terrapins."

The Delaware Center for the Inland Bays is considering starting a similar survey, Bartow said.

WANT TO COUNT TERRAPINS?

It is not too late to volunteer for this year's count. For more information go to the Maryland Coastal Bays website at www.mdcoastalbays.org. You can also contact Jen Rafter at 410-213-2297, ext. 109, or jrafter@mdcoastalbays.org.