

Turtles As Pets

If you own a pet turtle or want to own one, please consider the following.

- Turtles require a lot of care. They need clean cages, balanced diets, vitamin supplements, special lighting, and regular veterinary care.

- If they are well cared for, turtles will live a long time. A young box turtle given to a grandchild as a pet should outlive the child.

- Most states have laws that regulate the collection of turtles. Collection of rare or endangered species is prohibited.

- Although some turtles sold in pet stores are supplied by captive breeding programs, most are col-

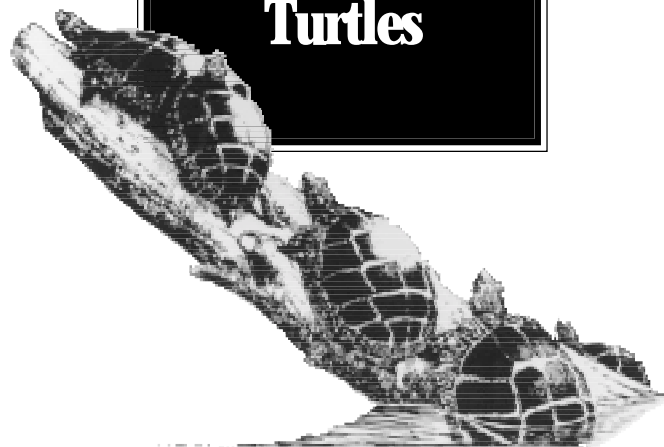
lected directly from the wild. Wild populations usually cannot withstand such collection pressure.

- Those who would like to have a pet turtle but don't want to endanger wild populations should only buy turtles that come from captive breeding programs. As an alternative, consider adopting a turtle that someone else no longer wants.

- Never release a captive turtle to the wild. It probably would not survive, may not be native to the area and could introduce diseases to wild populations.

TURTLES in TROUBLE

How You
Can Help Save
New England's
Turtles



We are all responsible for the protection and preservation of New England's turtles.

Illustrations by Mark McCollough, reproduced from *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Maine*, courtesy of Maine Agricultural Experiment Station, University of Maine

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TURTLES

are an ancient group of animals that have been swimming and walking the Earth for over 200 million years. They have been incorporated into the creation myths of several human cultures and are featured in numerous stories and songs, fables, legends, cartoons and comic books. Even at an early age, children readily recognize, and are attracted to, these scaly reptiles with the bony shells.



Despite their general acceptance by people and their long history of survival, turtles — from sea turtles to desert tortoises to New England's own wood turtles and diamondback terrapins — are in trouble. Without immediate action to protect them world-wide and in our own backyards, many species may be headed for extinction. This brochure outlines some ways that you can help.

Natural History

- Turtles are reptiles, as are lizards, snakes and crocodiles.

- The turtle's distinctive shell is made up of a combination of scales and bones, which include ribs and much of the backbone.

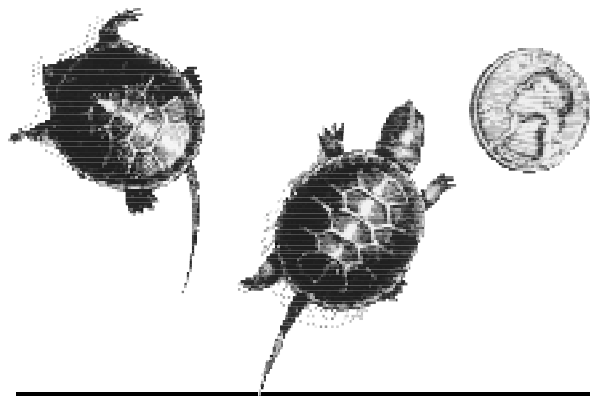
- Turtles are "cold-blooded." That is to say they are unable to generate heat to stay warm. They can warm themselves by basking in the sun or cool themselves by seeking shade, diving into water, or burrowing into leaf litter.

- In New England, turtles live both in water and on land. Painted, snapping, softshell, musk and red-bellied turtles live in water and rarely venture forth on land. Box turtles, on the other hand, live on land and are almost never seen in water. Other species, such as wood turtles and spotted turtles spend time both on land and in water.

- Even though some turtles spend much of their lives in water, all must leave the water to lay eggs. Females may travel more than a mile or just a few feet in order to find good areas to nest. Eggs are laid in a shallow hole in the ground, covered with dirt and left to be warmed by the sun. If they survive, the eggs will hatch in the late summer or early fall.

- If they hatch in the fall, hatchling turtles may spend the winter in their nest and emerge the following spring. Young turtles receive no care from their parents; they are on their own from the minute that they leave the egg.

- Turtles live a long time. Painted and snapping turtles may live 25 to 50 years in the wild; box turtles have been discovered that were over 120 years old.



The Tortoise and the Hare

As the story goes, what the turtle lacks in speed it makes up for in persistence. Compared to rabbits, turtles are not only slow-of-foot, they are also slow to reproduce. As a result, turtle populations are vulnerable to human disturbance and are slow to recover from population declines.

Whereas rabbits reach breeding age in their first year, turtles generally take a long time to reach sexual maturity (5-15 years depending on species and growth rates). Once a female turtle reaches maturity she will lay a relatively small number of eggs in an unguarded nest. Although snapping turtles may lay as many as 80 eggs in a season, most New England turtles have clutch sizes that are much smaller (less than 15 for most species).

A whole host of animals prey on turtle eggs and hatchlings, including skunks, foxes, opossums and raccoons. Only a very few eggs will yield hatchlings that survive for a year or more. Despite the odds, enough young turtles usually survive to keep the population going under normal circumstances.

Adult turtles typically live a long time and this helps make up for their limited capacity for reproduction. They lay eggs year after year, relying on time and persistence to yield a few young turtles to replace the adults. It is a delicate balance. If you remove too many adults from an area (killed on the highway or collected for pets) the population will slowly decline.

Threats

- Many turtles are killed on roads and highways as they move from one habitat to another or as females travel to nesting areas.

- In areas where people live, suburban wildlife such as raccoons, opossums and skunks prey heavily on turtle eggs and hatchlings.

- Whether collected singly or for the pet trade, turtles that are removed from populations by people are no longer able to mate or lay eggs in the wild. Every turtle removed reduces the ability of the population to maintain itself.

- Pollution of rivers, streams, lakes and ponds can eliminate turtles from an area.

- Destruction of habitat is probably the greatest threat to turtles. Some turtles may be killed directly by construction activity, but many more are lost when important habitats (shelter, feeding or nesting areas) are destroyed. As remaining habitat is broken up into smaller and smaller pieces, turtle populations become small and isolated, making them vulnerable to extinction from random events such as floods or diseases.



What Can You Do To Help?

- As you drive, watch out for turtles crossing the road. Be especially careful during the months of May and June when females are moving to and from nesting areas.

- When you see a turtle in the road, stop and assist it to the other side if it is safe to do so. Small turtles may be carried across the road; use a shovel or direct traffic around snapping turtles. Always move turtles across the road in the direction they were traveling; they know best which way they need to go.

- If you must pick up a turtle, take care to hold it in such a way that you and the turtle are not harmed.

Turtles have difficulty breathing when held vertically, so try to carry them in their normal position (parallel to the ground). Also, you should not pick up a turtle by its tail as this could cause injury to its spine.

- Do not disturb turtles that are nesting in your garden or yard.

- Spread the word that snapping turtles are no threat to anyone that can resist the temptation to harass them. They are slow and awkward on land and secretive in water, and make it a point to avoid people whenever they can.

- If you find a turtle in the wild, don't pick it up and take it home.