

## **TURTLES AT WEST POINT**

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There is one group of animals that has always been recognized by people as survivors. Those animals are turtles, which includes tortoises and terrapins.

As a group, they are animals with long lifespans, with some individuals known to live for more than 100 years. Humans view the trademark shell as a portable fortress that the turtle can quickly retreat into if threatened by predators. And of course, who could forget the classic fable of the tortoise and the hare? Turtles may not be speed demons, but they steadily move forward and persevere.

Worldwide, there are about 200 species of turtles, tortoises, and terrapins. There are about 50 species in the United States alone, which includes seven sea turtles. This represents an incredible amount of the Earth's turtle diversity.

On the West Point Military Reservation, we have six native species of turtle. They are: the common musk or stinkpot turtle; the common snapping turtle; the eastern painted turtle; the spotted turtle; the wood turtle; and, the eastern box turtle. The first three species are still fairly common while the spotted, wood, and box turtles are limited in their distribution.

Despite being "survivors", current research by scientists is showing that many turtle populations are not doing well. Their life history and biology make them particularly susceptible to human influences.

Many turtle species do not reach maturity until at least 10 to 15 years of age. Some species do not become mature adults until they are at least 20 years old. Many female turtles only lay a few eggs at a time (there are exceptions). As an example, a female box turtle lays no more than six eggs. Turtle eggs are readily consumed by a variety of predators (raccoons especially) so a female turtle may have no more than one or two egg clutches successfully hatch in her lifetime. Baby turtles, in turn, are also preyed upon by many predators - birds, mammals, some fish. And, with the exception of sea turtles, most turtles are "home bodies", traveling no more than a quarter-mile from the center of their territories.

So, how can people affect turtle populations? First, turtles have been viewed as a readily-available food source for much of human history. Snapping turtles and diamondback terrapins are still commercially harvested in parts of the US. Archaeological evidence has revealed that Australian aborigines played a major role in eliminating many Australian turtle species. Evidence is mounting that gathering turtles for food is responsible for the disappearance of turtles in Africa and Asia as well. The collection of sea turtle eggs for food is a major contributor to the decline of those species as well.

In Europe, the pet trade played a major role in eliminating most of the native European turtle fauna and is now contributing to the decline of many North American species as well. Box turtles, bog turtles, wood turtles, and many slider species are collected from the wild and shipped overseas by the thousands to satisfy the demand for turtles by Europeans.

So how does this affect turtles here? Unlike deer, turkeys, squirrels and other North American wildlife that is harvested annually, turtles cannot sustain the removal of adults from wild

populations. When only a few adult females in a population live long enough to have one clutch of eggs hatch and have young reach adulthood, you begin to realize the effect that removing adult turtles has on populations.

Another problem with pet turtles is diseases that can be transmitted to other turtles and humans. Salmonella poisoning is a major problem and an infected turtle may not be debilitated but can still transmit the infection. Wild turtles also carry many parasites that may not impair the individual but could decimate other species if the infected individual is released into another location.

That brings me to my final point: if you do have a pet turtle, do not release it back to the wild unless you are returning it to the exact spot it originally came from. Here at West Point, I have already found three exotic turtle species that people have released: a red-eared slider, a yellowbelly slider, and a western painted turtle. Besides the risk of disease transmission, male turtles are very aggressive to other male turtles. It is not uncommon to find turtles missing toes, legs, or eyes as a result of fights with other turtles. It is against the law in New York to collect box, wood, and bog turtles or possess them unless you have a permit. If you are bringing one from another state, you must check with the New York Dept. of Environmental Conservation's Special Licenses Unit before bringing the animal into New York.

Turtles as a group have survived for millions of years. It would be a shame if they could not survive human contact. For more information on turtles, you may call the USMA Wildlife Biologist at 938-3857. And, check out the following web site and its associated links:  
<http://www.xmission.com/~gastown/herpmed/chelonia.htm>