



ANDRE F. CHUNG: SUN STAFF

Big eater: Snapping turtles, like this one at the Baltimore Zoo, feast on baby ducks and geese, among other delicacies.

Voracious snapping turtles a scourge to Md. delegate

But his solution called
'brutally inhumane'

By MICHAEL DRESSER
SUN STAFF

As a boy growing up along the waterfront in eastern Baltimore County, Del. Michael H. Weir never had much use for snapping turtles. He still recalls with pride the week he dispatched 37 of the duckling-devouring varmints.

"I do like snapping turtles. I like 'em parboiled, fried or made into a snapping turtle soup, but apart from that I don't think they have much purpose," said the veteran Democratic legislator.

Today, at age 73, Weir still relishes the role of Turtle Terminator. Only now his weapon of choice in the battle against snappers is legislation.

This year, he sponsored a successful bill that would again make it legal to use a hook and line to catch snapping turtles on private property and in shallow tidal water. With little public opposition, the measure breezed through the Maryland Senate and the House of Delegates. It requires only the governor's signature to become law.

But last week, the slow-moving Turtle Lobby lumbered into action. The Humane Society of the United States, the [See Turtles, 8B]

Voracious turtles a scourge to lawmaker

[Turtles, from Page 1B]

nation's largest animal-protection group, urged Gov. Parris N. Glendening to veto the bill, charging that the practice of catching turtles by hook and line is "brutally inhumane."

According to the organization, catching turtles on the usually unattended lines can leave the ravenous reptiles struggling in agony for hours before they die.

The bill also raises larger issues about whether the law should encourage people to intervene on behalf of one wild species against a natural predator. The Humane Society says no.

"We like baby ducks and we like snapping turtles and we like functioning, intact ecosystems. Killing one component of an ecosystem to protect another is not only cruel but shortsighted and doomed to fail," said Susan Hagood, wildlife issues specialist for the Humane Society.

To Weir, vice chairman of the House Environmental Matters Committee, the choice is clear.

"It all depends on whether you like snapping turtles better than baby ducks, or baby ducks better than snapping turtles," he said.

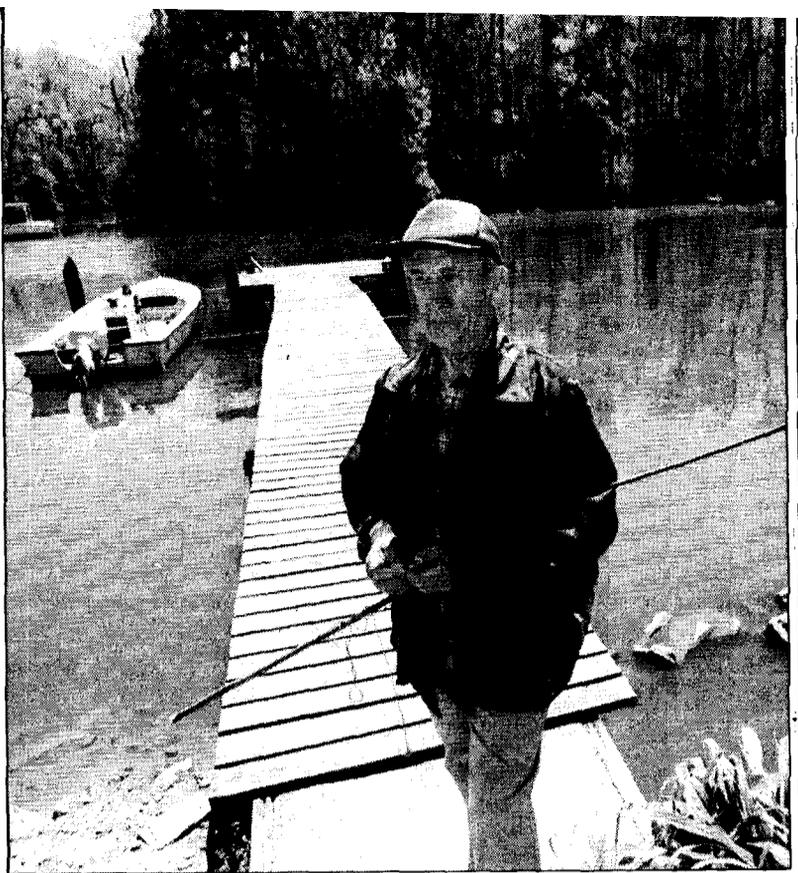
That argument was compelling enough for the General Assembly. All 47 senators voted for the Weir bill, while the House score was Ducks 129, Turtles 0.

The Humane Society's last-ditch appeal is to a governor whose Department of Natural Resources supported the legislation as helpful to ducks and not overly harmful to turtles.

It doesn't help the Humane Society's case that Chelydra serpentina serpentina is a rather unappealing client — even by the relaxed standards of class Reptilia.

"They're not charismatic. They look like little dinosaurs that hiss and live in the mud," said Allen Salzberg, a board member of the New York Turtle and Tortoise Society. "It's a reptile with a bad rap."

The Humane Society's Hagood noted that the usually dispassionate Peterson's Field Guide describes the snapper as "the only turtle with a long tail and a short



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Turtle foe: Baltimore County Del. Michael H. Weir, at Hogpen Creek east of Essex, wants to make it legal to use hooks and lines to catch snapping turtles on private property and in shallow tidal waters.

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temper."

"They're not pretty to look at by most people's standards," said Hagood. "They are not friendly."

Those are the turtle's defenders. Weir is more blunt.

"They're mean and they're dangerous and they get near as big as a bathtub," said the delegate, who earlier in his career won passage of a bill legalizing turtle pots, another method of capturing snappers.

Weir's size estimate is an exaggeration, but not by much. Snapping turtles can grow to more than 30 pounds, with shells as long as 1½ feet. Their length is almost doubled by their scaly tails, which appear as if they were grafted from a baby alligator.

The case for snapping turtles is not enhanced by the fierce bites they can deliver with their sharp jaws. But wildlife biologists say they are shy creatures that won't attack humans unless humans bother them.

Turtle advocates are hampered because they cannot claim the snapper is an endangered species. The animal is abundant over a huge swath of North America — from the Rockies to the Atlantic and from the Gulf of Mexico to Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia.

Snapping turtles are not picky eaters. Biologists say they are primarily scavengers but supplement their diet with fish, amphibians, small mammals — and, yes, baby ducks and geese.

Anthony Wisnieski, curator of reptiles and amphibians at the Baltimore Zoo, said waterfowl populations are not threatened by the turtles, for whom birds are only a small part of their diet. Besides, he said, snapping turtles play a useful role in the ecological system.

"The bird populations are probably even stronger for having the predators take the weak ones out," Wisnieski said.

But Weir, a longtime duck hunter, isn't buying any Darwinian logic. The crusty delegate has a much simpler solution in mind — one he learned in his youth before the practice was made illegal a couple of decades ago.

First, he said, you cut a sapling about 8 feet tall, leaving a few leaves on it to fool the turtles. You extend it over your pond with a 4-foot line dangling from the trunk into the water. At the end of the line, you attach a large hook baited with meat or salt eel.

"It's a very efficient way of getting rid of them," Weir said.

Wisnieski said he's seen results of this method during his travels in the South — the bloated bodies of snapping turtles that writhed for hours with hooks lodged deep in their throats or intestines.

"If you were doing that to a dog or a cat or a bunny rabbit, people would be outraged," said Wisnieski.

W. Peter Jensen, the state's deputy director of fisheries services, said the issue of whether the practice is humane never came up in the DNR's consideration of the issue. He defended the bill as a reasonable compromise that lets the state continue its ban on the use of hooks in deep water.

Jensen added that there is a healthy market for snapping turtle meat and that some Marylanders depend on that harvest for their livelihood. "There is no motive here to wipe out turtles," he said.

Ray Feldmann, a spokesman for Glendening, said yesterday that the governor has not decided whether to sign the bill. He said Glendening has asked the DNR for further information in response to the opponents' objections.

"He's clearly open to both sides at this point," Feldmann said. The governor has until May 22 to make up his mind.