

The Slider Terrapin Problem

(Paul H Eversfield- February 2015)

Since the early 1960's, the North American Slider turtles have been imported into Northern Europe as hatchlings from Turtle farms based in the Southern states of the USA. These small coin sized animals bred in their thousands became a staple of the pet and aquatic trade. Each year, many were sold to the public here in the UK and Europe, where for the most part they are relatively cheap expendable muses who offer a short burst of interest to their new "keepers".

Back in the early 1990's this trade expanded significantly when a craze for an animated comic strip, became a Television series, then a couple of Films, Teenage mutant Ninja Turtles. The storyline of which mapped out the life of a group of Terrapins which having been dumped by their owners in a city sewer system mutated into avenging "Super heroes". Suddenly, the hapless baby terrapin gained even greater appeal to a largely ignorant pet keeping community. The consequences were potentially catastrophic. Baby terrapins, mostly of the species Red Eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) which grow quickly, outgrew the aquarium set-ups that were sold as suitable accommodation. Frustrated parents whose children had grown tired of their "Donatello, Raphael, Leonardo & Michelangelo", decided to offload the animals, many unscrupulous individuals simply dumped them in to local ponds, lakes and rivers, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the Mutant Ninja Turtles who had been dumped in a city Sewer. Accordingly, across the world and in particular Northern Europe feral populations of these animals became an increasing sight. In most of this range, the animals will not breed as we do not get warm enough or long enough summers for eggs to hatch naturally. However, in Southern Europe, they have definitely established breeding populations.

Managing Allochthonous Turtles In The «Comunitat Valenciana» Region, Spain



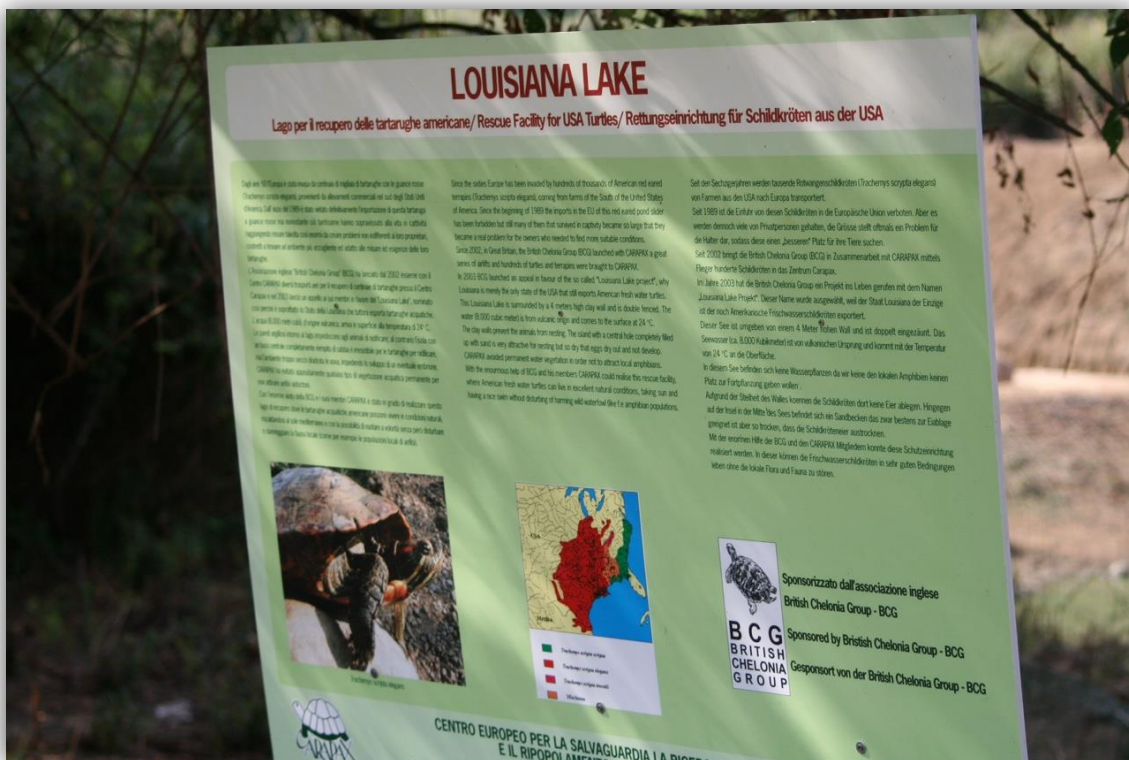
The *Trachemys* situation

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What harm? These exotic invaders certainly are capable of disrupting the natural food chain in the river/lake systems; they feed on molluscs, crustaceans, plant life, fish eggs and fish.

To counter this growing problem a number of organisations set up re-homing projects and tried to educate the public about the huge environmental problems that they were unleashing. These included well-meaning projects like the one in Tuscany at Centro CARAPAX. Here, the management thought they could solve much of Northern Europe's problem, by offering refuge in the Tuscan Countryside, creating small lakes and ponds in their Chelonian sanctuary. Though, this may have started with good intention, and in the telling seemed like a very good idea, the scale of the problem, overcrowding, sustainability issues and what may be considered as a naïve approach to husbandry and Bio security, all combined to generate significant ecological and welfare risks.



Carapax, 'Louisiana Lake', completed 2007



The first season following introduction of rehomed terrapins



The pond surface showing many terrapin heads

How prophetic, the choice of those Ninja Turtle names, all renaissance artists who had themselves plied their trade in the Tuscan Cities of Florence, Siena, and neighbouring Rome. Now, feral breeding populations of their progeny are establishing, with inevitable impact on the native freshwater fauna of the region.

From a conservation point of view, serious damage to natural populations of native species can result. This includes local extinction due to competition caused by the spreading of *T. scripta elegans*:

"This species has already determined the local extinction of Angitola's Emys orbicularis populations" (Emillo Sperone, Antonio Cresente, Elvira Brunelli, Guiseppe Paolillo, Sandro Tripepi, 2010).

Eventually, partly in response to lobbying from concerned organisations and individuals, Governments in the EU banned the import of this species from its native North America.

Problem solved? No!! In fact, all that happened was that other species were substituted, by the breeding farms in the USA, and more recently China, where the species has also been exported in the millions and today, a range of equally unsuitable species are commonly seen in the pet trade.

These include two direct cousins of the Red Eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*), the Yellow bellied slider (*Trachemys scripta scripta*) and the Cumberland Slider (*Trachemys scripta troosti*). These also occur naturally in the south east of the USA. From Virginia to Florida and west across to Alabama. Furthermore, other Sliders and Cooters (colloquial names for Basking Terrapins) of different species are also commonly imported, these include Hieroglyphic cooter (*Pseudemys concinna hieroglyphica*) Red bellied cooter (*Pseudemys nelsoni*) and other species from the same group. The problem with these species is the fact that they grow even larger than the Red eared Terrapin and will certainly outgrow most aquarium set-ups in the home.

If terrapins, continue as I suspect, to be kept as pets, then a far better understanding of their captive requirement is necessary. This includes all aspects of husbandry throughout their potentially long life span and suitable accommodation to cope with their specific requirements. Better species selection should also be considered as some of the less frequently seen species are much better suited to the home aquarium set-up. With better understanding, the life of these fascinating creatures can be maintained acceptably in captivity. However, it must be stressed that they are not and never should have been muses for brief periods of interest or as a children's plaything.

Information as to the likely potential size of species, best practise husbandry approaches and general healthcare is readily available from the internet and through relevant organisations such as the British Chelonia Group, British Herpetological Society and others.