

HELP FOR TURTLES

How many of you kept a box turtle as a pet? How many of you have let your children keep a box turtle as a pet?

For a reptile, box turtles have a very low 'yuck' index. Most people are charmed by their simple beauty, their quiet ways, and their neat trick of being able to completely pull their heads and legs into their shells.

Unfortunately, this appreciation is taking its toll on the Eastern Box Turtle. Not only is it ILLEGAL to take a turtle out of the wild to keep as a pet, we are literally loving them into extinction.

Experts agree that box turtles are in slow, but steady decline. Humans, of course, play a large role in this decline: destruction of habitat by development, roads dividing up habitat, death by construction machinery and motor vehicles, and pet collection all play a huge part in the deaths of thousands of box turtles each year. Until 1994, tens of thousands of box turtles were collected and shipped to Europe for sale in pet shops.

Another contribution to the decline of the box turtle is its own biology. A female does not begin laying eggs until she is about 10 years old. She will lay 2-10 eggs a year, many of which will be eaten by predators. The hatchlings that do make it out of the egg are vulnerable to predators until they are about 3-4 years old and their shells are hard enough to protect them.

Box Turtle Care

Once the turtles reach this age they stand a good chance of living for 25-100 years IF- and it's a big IF- they can live out their life in an undisturbed habitat. But we've already seen that the chances of that happening are pretty slim. Of the several hundred eggs a female box turtle will produce in her lifetime, only 2-3 hatchlings will survive to continue the species. Disturbing statistics, indeed.

Another factor which makes it difficult for box turtles to propagate is their habit of being 'homebodies'. Box turtles tend to live out their lives within a few acres of where they hatched.

This may seem like a positive thing, but when box turtles get displaced from their birth habitat they spend the rest of their lives looking for it instead of looking for a mate. They will neglect to eat and even hibernate in their quest to return home. Studies have shown that displaced box turtles will not resettle in a new location. No matter how many times they are recovered, the turtles continue to wander away looking for home.

So, how can we help?

- First and foremost, LEAVE THEM ALONE! Do not remove a box turtle from the wild unless it is sick or injured
- If you rescue a sick or injured turtle, write down the EXACT location where it was found so it can be returned there when it has recovered
- When you stop to help a turtle cross the road safely, make sure you move it in the same direction it was going
- If a box turtle lays its eggs on your property protect the nest and hatchlings from predators
- Support local and national legislation which protects habitat.