



New Ala. coastal fence protects endangered turtle

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MOBILE, Ala. (AP) — A new fence erected to keep the endangered Alabama red-bellied turtle in its swampy Mobile Delta habitat and off a busy highway appears to be working.

Experts tracking the turtle population said Tuesday the number of hatchlings struck by vehicles on the Causeway at Mobile declined from 94 in 2007 to 19 this year.

University of South Alabama herpetologist David Nelson said credit for the lower number of roadkill goes to the low barrier fence put up by the Alabama Department of Transportation along 3.4 miles of the highway bordering marshland.

Nelson and his students have tracked the turtles — the official state reptile — and marked about 400 of them with a drill hole for identification when they are recaptured in population surveys, he said.

Nelson said they have counted about 581 killed on the Causeway since 2001, including 421 spring hatchlings and 125 females. Nelson said the females require as long as 15 years to reach maturity so their continued loss at a rate of 20 a year would eventually cripple the population of this endangered species.

With the fence, he said, only nine adult females have been killed so far this year, compared to 15 the previous year.

"They are killed on lots of roads, but this is very intense traffic," he said at a news conference with state officials to announce completion of the \$145,000 fence project at key points along the Delta waters.

The turtles are found in rivers in Mobile and Baldwin counties in Alabama and Mississippi's Harrison and Jackson counties in the lower portions of the Pascagoula River and Back Bay of Biloxi, said state marine biologist Roger Clay.

He said the adult females are about 14 inches long and the males slightly smaller. The hatchlings have the red bellies but lose much of that intense color as they age and turn yellow or orange.

"They prefer to stay in the water all the time," Clay said. But they emerge to nest on dry land from April to early August, and that's when the roadkill threat grows. They nest near levees, roadsides, river banks or dredge spoil sites. The young may emerge in the fall or nest through winter until spring.

The turtles were listed by the federal government as endangered in 1987 and in 1992 became Alabama's official state reptile.

Department of Transportation spokesman Tony Harris said the state will place cautionary banners on the roadside during hatching season warning motorists that Alabama's red-bellied turtles "Need a Brake."

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