MEMORANDUM

To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners  
From: Melissa Tucker, Director, Habitat and Species Conservation  
       Colonel Roger Young, Law Enforcement  
Date: November 30, 2022  
Subject: Staff Report – Captive Breeding of Diamondback Terrapins

Purpose: Assess the role of captive breeding of diamondback terrapins in Florida within the context of conservation goals.

Why: As part of ongoing conservation efforts, the Commission directed staff to evaluate this topic.

Top Points:
1) The exploitation of turtles for global trade is a significant concern worldwide.
2) Diamondback terrapins are biologically vulnerable and declining in areas throughout their range, including Florida.
3) The Commission recently approved rule changes to provide additional protections to terrapins.
4) Because of the potential risk of increased harm to native populations, staff recommends keeping the current regulations related to possession limits.

Affected Parties: Diamondback terrapin owners, turtle breeders, individuals, and organizations with interest in diamondback terrapin conservation.

Summary: Overseas market demand for turtles is high, and illegal turtle trafficking of native species is a major concern in Florida and among other states. Within this context, Florida is home to five subspecies of diamondback terrapins, three of which are only found in Florida. In addition to illegal collection in the wild, the species faces threats from habitat loss and degradation, predation, climate change and incidental mortality. Diamondback terrapins have a high market demand within the U.S. and abroad, with desire for Florida-specific subspecies generating significant prices. Although captive breeding of this species has not been allowed in Florida since 2006, some stakeholders have suggested that allowances to captively breed terrapins for commercial purposes could meet the domestic and international pet market demand and thereby reduce collection pressures on wild terrapins. Analyses of case studies and market data cause many conservationists, law enforcement professionals, and turtle experts to conclude that captive breeding not only would not reduce turtle trafficking, but it likely would lead to increased illegal collection and demand for native terrapins. Staff explored several captive breeding options by soliciting input through a questionnaire to targeted stakeholders and through two public webinars. Stakeholder input was mixed with potential breeders favoring creating a commercial market and non-breeder participants voicing concern over enforcement and oversight of that market. Given the species’ vulnerable life history traits in Florida, coupled with the potential risk of increased harm to native populations through impacts of collection pressure, demand, and contributing to illicit turtle trade, staff recommends the current rules remain unchanged.

Staff Recommendation: Direct staff to maintain current rules, which prohibit captive breeding of diamondback terrapins.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter: Melissa Tucker, Division of Habitat and Species Conservation; Grant Burton, Division of Law Enforcement; and Dr. Brian Horne, Wildlife Conservation Society  

Affected Rules: None