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Taking care of terrapins

Cape Abilities team helps protect threatened species

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WELLFLEET - After working all winter and spring, the Turtle Team assembled at Cape Abilities Day Habilitation headquarters in North Eastham Friday to take a trip to see the fruits of their labor in action.

The team - Jamie Devlin, 35, of Wellfleet; Christine Scarsella, 33, of Brewster; Heather Quinlan, 46, of Dennisport; and Shawn Heffernan, 30, of Orleans (along with Corina Russe, 29, of Truro, who couldn't make it Friday) - spent months cutting one-quarter-inch chicken wire and bending it into cages.

They traveled to the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to see how those cages would be used to protect threatened terrapin turtle hatchlings from most predators.

Cape Abilities, which provides services to disabled Cape Cod residents from Bourne to Provincetown, provides both volunteer and paid labor to various projects across the Cape. In this case, the Turtle Team has produced around 30 cages a year for Audubon over the past five years.

"It's work, hard work," Devlin said. Even with gloves, Heffernan said he had a few cuts from the sharp edges of the chicken wire.

The group averages around two cages per week, but loved the idea their work was helping save a population in danger of extinction.

Terrapins are listed as a threatened species in Massachusetts. Sanctuary director Robert Prescott explained that their prime habitat, the sandy shore and vegetated beach upland, is under assault by various natu-

ral and manmade forces. Development has taken its toll, but erosion also has washed away beaches, especially in front of stone walls built to protect property from the waves.

But the key for turtles is temperature, Prescott explained. Terrapins like sandy roads and coastal banks because they provide a vegetation clear area that is easily warmed by the sun. Females deposit as many as 20 or more eggs into an urn-shaped hole with a narrow entrance they dig in the sand. If the hole is any deeper than 7 inches, the bottom layer of eggs will not get enough heat to develop inside the egg.

Even when they do find a spot to nest, nature has its own perils, with birds, coyotes, foxes and other predators killing off 95 percent of the hatchlings. And nature is cruel in other ways: On Friday, turtle researcher Tempe Regan held up a plant root that had grown down into a nest and right through two eggs that dangled like beads. Ants and maggots also could invade the nest and devour tiny turtles.

The sanctuary works hard to get turtles out of the way of man and beast, with 40 volunteers patrolling Audubon beaches and going to sites on private land where they can relocate nests in safer areas away from driveways and roads. They developed the prototype for these cages, but hundreds are needed each year, and the work to make them is labor intensive.

When Glenn Loomis, director of Day Habilitation called five years ago to inquire whether there were any projects the Sanctuary needed help with, the Turtle Team was born.

"When he told me about the



STEVE HEASLIP PHOTO

Cape Abilities clients Shawn Heffernan, left, and Jamie Devlin, right, look at the cages they made to protect diamondback terrapin hatchlings at the Massachusetts Audubon Society sanctuary in Wellfleet. Below, turtle researcher Tempe Regan shows off diamondback hatchlings at the sanctuary to Heffernan, Devlin and fellow Cape Abilities client Christine Scarsella.

project, I said 'Yes, let's help the turtles. They need help,'" said Devlin, who also has been working at an Eastham veterinarian's office for 13 years.

Cloudy, cool weather this week meant there were no turtles hatching in the cages scattered over 10 sites off the sanctuary trails. But there were plenty of "oohs" and "aahs" as Regan pulled a protective towel off the bank of plastic boxes that made up the terrapin "nursery." She opened one box and team members watched silver dollar-sized ter-



rapin hatchlings scramble.

Prescott explained the attraction humans have for turtles.

"These are animals that everyone remembers," he said. "They are one of the first animals you ever held."

