

Benfield Elementary students helping to save terrapins



Sharon Lee Tegler - For The Capital

First-grader Danielle Scheimreif assists teacher Gina Fisher in measuring Squirt, the terrapin, as Annika Drilling, Drew Seaman and Jonah Fogle look on.

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Terrapins Crush and Squirt, were happily swimming in their aquarium in a corner of Gina Fisher's Benfield Elementary School classroom last Thursday afternoon .

A ledge above the duo is decorated with numerous stuffed turtles collected by Mrs. Fisher. The pair seemed quite content.

But then, abruptly, they went airborne. Cradled in a plastic pail, the tiny twosome were whisked to the front of the class and plunked down next to a small scale.

It was measuring day.

As Crush and Squirt attempted to climb out of their container, first-graders Annika Drilling, Jonah Fogle, Danielle Scheimreif and Andrew Seaman, gathered around to help.

Their classmates have fed and handled the terrapins, as well, as participants in a supplemental educational project called "Terrapin Connection" offered by Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Center.

A total of 80 elementary, middle and high school classrooms were selected by the center to receive a pair of terrapins, an aquarium and equipment needed for their care. The turtles were taken from a hatch of 160 on Poplar Island.

The island, a Chesapeake Bay land mass that had all but disappeared, has been restored as a

wildlife refuge by the Army Corps of Engineers.

The controversial project's two-fold objective - to rebuild the island by depositing material dredged from Baltimore Harbor while creating habitat - is experimental. However, there are already positive results.

Though the project is years from completion, many varieties of wildlife now call Poplar Island home.

A lack of predators, undisturbed sandy shorelines, and a diverse habitat make for ideal diamondback terrapin nesting sites.

However, the turtles have inhabited a side of the island still under construction. To protect the hatchlings from harm, volunteers gather them up for later release in a protected inlet that leads to open water.

By raising the baby terrapins until they are more mature, Terrapin Connection participants significantly increase their chances for survival.

During their stewardship, students collect growth data, observe terrapin behaviors, learn how to care for them, and research their history.

Mrs. Fisher's students are aware of the important part they are playing in this process and are eager to share information.

While Frederick Riggin "just likes to observe" Crush and Squirt, Michael Isakov and Suristee Motiram appreciate the scientific facts they've learned.

Michael explained that the difference between terrapins and their land-based cousins, tortoises, is that terrapins spend their lives underwater. Suristee pointed out that raising Crush and Squirt is important because terrapins are good for the bay because they eat the snails that destroy the seaweed that cleanses the water.

Voices rose in excitement as Danielle, Annika, Drew and Jonah noticed that both terrapins appeared to have grown substantially.

Born in late August, they were quite small when they arrived at Benfield.

As Mrs. Fisher handed Squirt to Jonah, the terrapin squirmed away and raced down the table creating momentary chaos. But, soon, he was back in the boy's hands ready to be sized.

Squirt's "carapace," or top shell, registered 6.5 centimeters which meant he'd grown 5 millimeters since the last measurement day.

After flipping the turtle, and measuring his "plastron," or bottom shell, the teacher passed him to Andrew for height and width measurements. "Hey, he's kicking me," Drew exclaimed with a chuckle.

"They were so much easier when they were babies," Mrs. Fisher replied.

As the children helped, they enjoyed touching the velvety skin of the turtles' necks and legs. Danielle revealed that the terrapins can be identified by the color of their skin. Squirt's skin is white with black spots while Crush's is grey, and by the number of bumps on their carapaces.

Upon completing the measurements, calculations revealed that Squirt and Crush grew considerably, not only in weight, but in width, length, and in the "meat" portion of their bodies between their shells.

Re-entering their aquarium, the little creatures dove to its depths, then zigzagged past the basking rocks on which they warm their bodies under heat lamps.

Happy to call the aquarium home for now, the pair will shortly add snails and other creatures to their diet in preparation for their return to the Bay. By May, they'll have reached the dimensions of a hamburger.

At that time, Mrs. Fisher and several class members will make a field-trip to release Crush and Squirt on Poplar Island where they were born.

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