

Saving Turtles Together

By Fred Boyce

The AZA SAFE American Turtles program

The North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores has just opened its newly expanded outdoor habitat for eastern box turtles. Located along the scenic marsh boardwalk, just to the east of the snake pavilion, the first incarnation of this habitat was constructed in 2013 and was enclosed by a low fence made of treated fence posts. This first habitat provided a great outdoor home for our box turtles and weathered five severe storms, including Hurricanes Dorian and Michael, but inevitably began showing signs of wear and tear over the past two years and clearly needed an upgrade.

The spacious new habitat, roughly three times as large as the previous one, will give our turtles much more room to roam. Instead of treated wooden posts, which are susceptible to rot, the new fence is constructed of large and nearly indestructible palisades formed of plastic composite made from recycled mate-



Two views of the newly completed box turtle habitat at the local aquarium

—Photo by Fred Boyce

rials. The front part of the habitat, under the boardwalk, is made of sturdy mesh, which will allow water to pass through in case of flooding.

In February 2020, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) introduced “American Turtles” as a new part of their signature conservation initiative, SAFE (Saving Animals From Extinction). American Turtles includes such severely threatened northern species as the Blanding’s turtle and the wood turtle, as well as three species of turtle native to North Carolina: the spotted turtle, the bog turtle and the eastern box turtle.

More than 60 percent of the world’s 356 turtle species—the highest percentage of any vertebrate—are considered to be in peril. In addition to the ubiquitous issue of habitat loss, worldwide declines in turtle populations are being driven by a thriving illegal trade that serves a global demand for turtles as pets, food or use

in traditional medicine. Southeast Asia has always been among the world’s richest regions for turtle diversity, but as its native turtle species have become depleted, importers have turned to wildlife traffickers in the United States. “When the turtles we’re used to seeing are literally being taken from their homes, it’s heartbreaking,” says Dave Collins of the Tennessee Aquarium, who is the program leader and driving force behind American Turtles. “When you see pictures of a pen with 200 to 400 box turtles all piled on top of one another waiting to be shipped into the trade, it’s devastating.”



One of the turtles in the aquarium habitat—Photo by Ara McClanahan

Collins considers the eastern United States to be another turtle hotspot. “Whether it’s bog turtles in North Carolina or wood turtles in Upstate New York, trafficking is having a dramatic impact on turtle populations all over the country,” he says. Collins conceived of a collaborative partnership with zoos and aquariums, universities, government agencies and conservation nonprofits working together to solve the problem.

One of the biggest difficulties is that any interdiction by law enforcement inevitably produces numbers of confiscated turtles that require proper housing and care. “Being able to hand confiscated turtles over to expert care providers through the SAFE program allows wildlife agencies to focus on being proactive,” says Julie Slacum of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife’s Chesapeake Bay Field Office. “This results in the best conservation outcome for these turtles, whether they are released into the wild, captive bred for assurance colonies or used for education

(Continued on page 6)