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Eastern box turtle’s path to NC state symbol status



An eastern box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) surveys its surroundings as dusk approaches. During the summer, turtles are most active in the morning or after rain, and during spring and fall they’re active throughout the day. PROVIDED BY SERVOS



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Asheville Citizen Times

Great Smoky Mountains National Park is one of the most biodiverse places in the world, so it’s no surprise that many of the plants and animals chosen as symbols of the two states it straddles — North Carolina and Tennessee — are found within its boundary. Mockingbirds and cardinals, fireflies and dogwoods, opossums and passion-

flowers have all found a place of honor in state statutes over the years, as have raccoons, tulip poplars, zebra swallowtail butterflies, Southern Appalachian brook trout, gray squirrels and marbled salamanders. But only one species has earned the honor of symbolhood in both states: the eastern box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*). “They’re survivors,” said J.J. Apodaca, executive director of the Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, a nationwide nonprofit that supports amphibian and reptile conservation in the United States. “They’re adapted to this landscape, and they represent holding on and surviving. They’re an astounding

symbol of the awe that the natural world can bring us. That’s why so many people come to the Smokies — and what an amazing mascot of that.” Eastern box turtles, including the widespread woodland box turtle subspecies (*Terrapene carolina carolina*) that occurs in the Smokies, are the picture of adaptability and endurance. They can eat just about anything — grass, fruit, mushrooms, salamanders, eggs, and even carrion all make it onto the box turtle’s menu — and tolerate a wide range of temperatures. Their range covers most of the eastern Unit-

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HHS to cut immigrants’ access to health programs

Community health centers, Head Start will be among those affected

Trevor Hughes
USA TODAY

Federal officials are halting access by undocumented immigrants to a wide variety of health care programs, from Head Start to community health centers, a change potentially affecting tens of millions of people a year. The move, announced July 10 by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., would strip an estimated \$374 million in Head Start funding from families that no longer qualify. The move is part of President Donald Trump’s ongoing immigration crackdown, which has seen the borders tightened and more aggressive detention and deportation of people living in the United States without permission. Also on July 10, the Labor Department announced new rules limiting who can access its programs, as did the Justice, Education and Agriculture departments. White House officials said the aggregate changes would save \$40 billion in benefits that would have otherwise gone to undocumented immigrants. “For too long, the government has diverted hardworking Americans’ tax dollars to incentivize illegal immigration,” Kennedy said in a statement. “Today’s action changes that — it restores integrity to federal social programs, enforces the rule of law, and protects vital resources for the American people.” Federal law still requires hospitals to treat any patient who is suffering a medical emergency, regardless of their immigration status or ability to pay.

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798 deaths reported near Gaza aid hubs in 6 weeks

U.N. calls aid distribution model ‘inherently unsafe’

Olivia Le Poidevin
REUTERS

GENEVA — The United Nations rights office said July 11 it had recorded at least 798 killings within the past six weeks at aid points in Gaza run by the U.S.- and Israeli-backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation and near convoys run by other relief groups. The GHF uses private U.S. security and logistics companies to get supplies into Gaza, largely bypassing a U.N.-led system that Israel alleges has let Ha-

mas-led militants loot aid shipments intended for civilians. Hamas denies the allegation. After the deaths of hundreds of Palestinian civilians trying to reach the GHF’s aid hubs in zones where Israeli forces operate, the U.N. has called its aid model “inherently unsafe” and a violation of humanitarian impartiality standards. “(From May 27) up until the seventh of July, we’ve recorded 798 killings, including 615 in the vicinity of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation sites, and 183 presumably on the route of aid convoys,” U.N. rights office spokesperson

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Palestinians inspect the damage July 11 after an overnight Israeli strike on a school sheltering displaced families in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip. MAHMOUD ISSA/REUTERS



Kays

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ed States, from the dry grasslands of Texas to the swampy humidity of Florida and all the way north to Maine and the Great Lakes. In hot weather, they stay cool under logs, mud, or leaves; in cold weather, they find an insulated place to rest in a hibernation-like state, slowing their metabolism to nearly nothing as they await the return of warmer weather.

Perhaps the most obviously fascinating feature of the box turtle is its shell, one of the most advanced pieces of armor any animal has ever worn. The turtle can close the hard top and bottom pieces together, affording it near-complete protection from predators once it draws its appendages inside. But it’s what happens after the shell opens that first earned legislators’ interest back in 1979, when North Carolina became the first state to make the eastern box turtle its mascot.

“In order for a turtle to make progress, he must stick his neck out,” Rep. Chris Barker, a Democrat from the coastal region in Craven County and the box turtle’s most stalwart proponent at the time, was quoted as saying in multiple newspapers in 1979. “I think state officials and the General Assembly should emulate this.”

In this manner, Barker led by example. As reported by the Asheville Citizen Times, Barker “often wore his woolen turtle embroidered vest and turtle pins and carried two pet-rock turtles to prove the seriousness of his efforts.” To encourage his colleagues in the Senate Wildlife Committee to move the bill forward, however, he enlisted the help of Sid Mitchell, a 12-year-old boy and aspiring herpetologist from Cary. Mitchell brought in two of his seven pet eastern box turtles to show the committee, to which he “explained the difference between the male and female and talked about some of his other turtles.”

“The senators apparently were impressed with the evidence they saw,” the Citizen Times reported. “There was little discussion and not much of the ribbing Barker endured when the House committee acted on the bill.”

The measure’s most vocal opponent was Sen. Cecil R. Jenkins Jr., a Democrat from Cabarrus County, the sole senator to vote no. The turtle “is not a progressive animal,” Jenkins opined, as quoted in the Winston-Salem Journal — North Carolina should not be represented by “something that sticks its head in a shell.”

But eastern box turtle supporters prevailed, and on March 19, 1979, the General Assembly read and ratified the whimsically worded document declaring the turtle North Carolina’s official state reptile, describing it as “a most fascinating creature” that “serves to control harmful and pestiferous insects and acts as one of nature’s clean-up crew.” Though “the turtle is derided by some who have missed the finer things of life,” the act continues, it “watches undisturbed as countless generations of faster hares run by to quick oblivion, and is thus a model of patience for mankind and a symbol of this State’s unrelenting pursuit of great and lofty goals.”

One and a half decades later, Tennessee followed North Carolina’s example. The bill, which also sought to designate the Tennessee cave salamander as state amphibian, was introduced by Rep. Robert Patton, a Republican from Johnson City.

“[Patton] carried a box turtle in a glass jar onto the House floor to make his pres-



An eastern box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) draws its head inside of its closing shell. Box turtles can close the top and bottom portions of their shells together, affording them robust protection against predators.
PROVIDED BY RYAN HAGERTY/U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



A woodland box turtle (*Terrapene carolina carolina*), the subspecies of eastern box turtle that occurs in most of the species’ range, makes its way through a forested area in the Great Smoky Mountains.
PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE ARCHIVES/GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

entation,” reports a March 24, 1995, issue of The Tennessean. “The turtle wasn’t swimming. In fact, it was deceased. The bill passed anyway.”

Perhaps Patton’s plea was rendered more persuasive by the support of Heather Michelle Harrison, an 11-year-old girl from Hendersonville, just north of Nashville, who Patton described in an Associated Press article published by the Elizabethton Star as “a real turtle lover.” Harrison collected 200 signatures in favor of the measure and asked her parents to drive her to the capitol building so she could watch the House debate.

The measure sailed through the House 83-3 on March 23 and passed the Senate on May 18 with only two opposing votes. One of them came from Sen. Bob Rochelle, a Democrat from Lebanon, who complained that constituents would view debate on such matters as “wasted time.” In response, Sen. Bud Gilbert, a Republican from Knoxville, “suggested Rochelle was ‘disturbed because he’s getting ready to lose his position as state reptile,’” the Knoxville News-Sentinel reported.

Now the eastern box turtle is celebrat-

ing 30 years as the most highly honored reptile in the Great Smoky Mountains — merely a blip on the radar for some of these magnificent creatures. Though they typically live for 25-35 years, eastern box turtles have been known to reach over 100 years old, with females remaining capable of reproduction into their 90s.

“It’s pretty wild that you can come across a box turtle that was on the landscape when we were harvesting trees from the area to try to win World War Two,” Apodaca said. “A box turtle could have seen that.”

Such a long-lived individual would have seen many changes over the years that have often made life harder for box turtles and other wildlife species.

“This is a species that has historically been thought of as one of the most abundant turtles, but right now we’re extremely concerned about them as a whole, across their entire range,” Apodaca said.

Habitat loss is a huge challenge. As more land is developed, there are fewer places for eastern box turtles to live, and their natural movements are restricted

by human-made obstacles like buildings and retaining walls. Road construction, higher speed limits, and growing traffic counts are also a problem; eastern box turtles need 5-10 years to reach sexual maturity, with females typically laying only about four or five eggs each year, so populations don’t recover quickly if damaged. Eastern box turtles are also the most-poached turtle in the United States, with unscrupulous collectors nabbing them for sale as pets. Adding to the issue is the rise of mid-level predators like skunks and racoons, which often thrive in residential areas due to easy access to human garbage. They also enjoy eating box turtles.

Though eastern box turtles continue to face many challenges, Apodaca said, “we’ve seen a lot more effort in the last decade or so” to conserve them.

If denizens of the Great Smoky Mountains pull together to give their official reptilian symbol its due, perhaps the eastern box turtle will, as North Carolina’s enabling legislation states, continue to “watch undisturbed” as the wider world passes it by, munching its placid, unhurried way through Southern Appalachian forests.

You don’t have to be a wildlife professional to help box turtles. When mowing , leave the grass higher during the spring and fall to avoid accidentally killing or injuring a turtle hiding in the brush. Drive the speed limit and pay attention to the road, especially during spring and fall. If you see a turtle and can safely stop to help it cross, always move it in the direction it was already heading. Support organizations like Safe Passage that work to keep turtles and other animals safe when they encounter a human highway.

Holly Kays Bowman is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokies-life.org.

Immigrants

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Many federal programs, including the one formerly known as food stamps, are already limited to citizens and legal residents only. HHS officials said this change brings Head Start and the community Health Center Program into compliance with that existing policy, which is designed to limit public ser-

vices to legal citizens.

It was not immediately clear how many people would lose services under the new rules, or whether American citizen children of undocumented immigrants would lose access to Head Start and other programs.

The change stunned health care workers across the country as they scrambled to understand the implications of the decision.

In a statement, the National Association of Community Health Centers said

it’s working with its legal team to understand the impact of the new rules, given that federal law requires the centers to accept “all residents of the area served by the center.”

The access change also applies to some mental health treatment, homelessness transition and drug treatment programs.

The White House argues that federal spending and taxes could be lower if Americans didn’t have to pay for health care and other services provided to peo-

ple living in the United States without legal permission. Both Florida and Texas already require hospitals to ask the immigration status of people seeking help.

Head Start this year served 754,819 students across every state. The program provides both educational and health care assistance to children. HHS officials said it would cost about \$22 million to change Head Start operations to begin tracking citizenship, and \$115 million to \$175 million to make those changes agencywide.

Gaza deaths

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Ravina Shamdasani told a media briefing in Geneva.

The GHF, which began distributing food packages in Gaza in late May after Israel lifted an 11-week aid blockade, told Reuters the U.N. figures were “false and misleading.” It denies that deadly incidents have occurred at its sites.

“The fact is the most deadly attacks on aid sites have been linked to U.N. convoys,” a GHF spokesperson said. “Ulti-

mately, the solution is more aid. If the U.N. (and) other humanitarian groups would collaborate with us, we could end or significantly reduce these violent incidents.”

The Israeli army told Reuters that it was reviewing recent mass casualties and that it had sought to minimize friction between Palestinians and the Israel military by installing fences and signs and opening additional routes.

The U.N. rights office, or OHCHR, said it based its figures on sources such as information from hospitals in Gaza, cemeteries, families and Palestinian health authorities.

Most of the injuries to Palestinians in the vicinity of aid distribution hubs recorded by the OHCHR since May 27 were gunshot wounds, Shamdasani said. “We’ve raised concerns about atrocity crimes having been committed and the risk of further atrocity crimes being committed where people are lining up for essential supplies such as food,” she said.

After the GHF assertion that the OHCHR figures are false and misleading, Shamdasani said: “It is not helpful to issue blanket dismissals of our concerns — what is needed is investigations into why people are being killed while trying to access aid.”

Israel has said its forces operate near the relief aid sites to prevent supplies falling into the hands of militants.

The GHF said on July 11 it had delivered more than 70 million meals to Gaza Palestinians in five weeks, and that other humanitarian groups had “nearly all of their aid looted” by Hamas or criminal gangs.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has previously cited instances of violent pillaging of aid, and the U.N. World Food Program said the week of June 29 that most trucks carrying food assistance into Gaza had been intercepted by “hungry civilian communities.”