Drivers swerve purposely to run over fake turtle, student project shows

Published December 27, 2012 | Associated Press

Clemson University student Nathan Weaver set out to determine how to help turtles cross the road. He ended up getting a glimpse into the dark souls of some humans.

Weaver put a realistic rubber turtle in the middle of a lane on a busy road near campus. Then he got out of the way and watched over the next hour as seven drivers swerved and deliberately ran over the animal. Several more apparently tried to hit it but missed.

"I've heard of people and from friends who knew people that ran over turtles. But to see it out here like this was a bit shocking," said Weaver, a 22-year-old senior in Clemson's School of Agricultural, Forest and Environmental Sciences.

To seasoned researchers, the practice wasn't surprising.

The number of box turtles is in slow decline, and one big reason is that many wind up as roadkill while crossing the asphalt, a slow-and-steady trip that can take several minutes.

Sometimes humans feel a need to prove they are the dominant species on this planet by taking a two-ton metal vehicle and squishing a defenseless creature under the tires, said Hal Herzog, a Western Carolina University psychology professor.

"They aren't thinking, really. It is not something people think about. It just seems fun at the time," Herzog said. "It is the dark side of human nature."

Herzog asked a class of about 110 students getting ready to take a final whether they had intentionally run over a turtle, or been in a car with someone who did. Thirty-four students raised their hands, about two-thirds of them male, said Herzog, author of a book about humans' relationships with animals, called "Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat."

Weaver, who became interested in animals and conservation through the Boy Scouts and TV's "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin, wants to figure out the best way to get turtles safely across the road and keep the population from dwindling further.

Among the possible solutions: turtle underpasses or an education campaign aimed at teenagers on why drivers shouldn't mow turtles down.

The first time Weaver went out to collect data on turtles, he chose a spot down the road from a big apartment complex that caters to students. He counted 267 vehicles that passed by, seven of them intentionally hitting his rubber reptile.

He went back out about a week later, choosing a road in a more residential area. He followed the same procedure, putting the fake turtle in the middle of the lane, facing the far side of the road, as if it was early in its journey across. The second of the 50 cars to pass by that day swerved over the center line, its right tires pulverizing the plastic shell.

"Wow! That didn't take long," Weaver said.

Other cars during the hour missed the turtle. But right after his observation period was up, before Weaver could retrieve the model, another car moved to the right to hit the animal as he stood less than 20 feet away.

"One hit in 50 cars is pretty significant when you consider it might take a turtle 10 minutes to cross the road," Weaver said.
Running over turtles even has a place in Southern lore.

In South Carolina author Pat Conroy's semi-autobiographical novel "The Great Santini," a fighter-pilot father squishes turtles during a late-night drive when he thinks his wife and kids are asleep.

His wife confronts him, saying: "It takes a mighty brave man to run over turtles."

The father denies it at first, then claims he hits them because they are a road hazard. "It's my only sport when I'm traveling," he says. "My only hobby."

That hobby has been costly to turtles.

It takes a turtle seven or eight years to become mature enough to reproduce, and in that time, it might make several trips across the road to get from one pond to another, looking for food or a place to lay eggs. A female turtle that lives 50 years might lay over 100 eggs, but just two or three are likely to survive to reproduce, said Weaver's professor, Rob Baldwin.

Snakes also get run over deliberately. Baldwin wishes that weren't the case, but he understands, considering the widespread fear and loathing of snakes. But why anyone would want to run over turtles is a mystery to the professor.

"They seem so helpless and cute," he said. "I want to stop and help them. My kids want to stop and help them. My wife will stop and help turtles no matter how much traffic there is on the road. I can't understand the idea why you would swerve to hit something so helpless as a turtle."