Clemson student's turtle project takes dark twist

By JEFFREY COLLINS
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Clemson University student Nathan Weaver just wanted to put together a project to help figure out the best way to assist turtles in crossing the road. But he also ended up with a peek into the dark souls of some human beings.

Weaver put realistic-looking rubber turtles, no bigger than a saucer, in the middle of a lane on a busy road near campus. Then he got out of the way and watched as over the next hour, seven drivers intentionally ran over the turtle, and several more appeared to try to hit the defenseless animal, but missed.

"It was a bit surprising. 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.

But to seasoned researchers, the targeting of turtles and other reptiles isn't surprising. The number of box turtles is on a slow decline, with one prominent reason being the riskiness of crossing the road because the trip takes several minutes.

And even in today's more enlightened, modern world, 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 animal 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."

To illustrate his point, 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, who wrote a book about humans relationships with animals called "Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat."

Weaver also discovered being a turtle in a college town can be tough. He wants to study animals and help them thrive and plans to go to graduate school. He said he became interested in animals and conservation through watching one of his heroes, "The Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin on television, and through Boy Scout campouts and hikes in the nearby mountains.

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

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 - the second one this time," Weaver said.

The other cars during this hour missed the turtle. But right after his observation period was up, before Weaver could get into the road to get 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 spot in Southern lore. The reptiles used to be ubiquitous, especially in the spring as the males sought mates and the females looked for nice places to lay eggs. South Carolina author Pat Conroy, in his novel "The Great Santini" based on growing up with his Marine father, has the fighter pilot father run over turtles during a late night drive when he thought his kids and wife were asleep. But 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 roadway hazard. "It's my only sport when I'm traveling. My only hobby."

But that hobby has been very costly to turtles. Several studies have been posted in recent years about a decline in a number of reptile populations, including snakes and turtles, said Weaver's professor at Clemson, Rob Baldwin.

What makes the problem worse for turtles is they reproduce slowly too. It takes a turtle seven or eight years from hatching to become mature enough to reproduce, and in that time, the turtle might make several trips across the road to get from one pond to the other, looking for food or a safe place to nest. A female turtle that lives 50 years might lay over 100 eggs, but chances are just two or three of them survive to reproduce, Baldwin said.

"You may not see the damage done to the population for decades," Baldwin said.

Snakes are also in danger by people who run over them. Baldwin wishes that wasn't the case, but he understands, considering the bad, but unearned, cultural reputation snakes have. But any reason why anyone would want to run over turtles eludes the professor.

"My immediate response is to help when I see a turtle. They seem so helpless and cute," Baldwin 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."