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Maryland's terrapin featured in new book

By [LESLIE HUNT](#), Staff Writer



Author Jennifer Keats Curtis' second try at writing a children's book about Maryland's marine life is taking off at a faster clip than its slow moving subject matter - the diamondback terrapin - Maryland's state reptile.

The Arnold resident's "Turtles in my Sandbox" follows her first book "Oshus and Shelly Save the Bay" published in 1999.

Although the first book garnered little interest from publishers, she managed to market the book - about an oyster siblings' quest to save the bay from pollution - while raising \$15,000 for oyster recovery initiatives for the Severn River Association

The new terrapin book is about a little girl who finds diamondback terrapin eggs in her sandbox and raises nine of them. The book has found its first venue in the Terrapin Headstarting program, where diamondback terrapin eggs are gathered by scientists each summer and hatched then given to a limited number of schools to raise.

Taking the turtle out of the sandbox and into the classrooms for show-and-tell style visits to read her book and share her pet terrapin "Rascal" (on loan from the University of Maryland Biological Institute) with elementary school students is a new passion for the writer.

"For many kids, this is the first time they'll have seen the state reptile."

Although spending time reading in schools, developing an educational web site, partnering with organizations and talking up the terrapin sounds, Mrs. Curtis describes herself as "...a writer lucky enough to combine language arts skills and science to write about animals that live in our backyard and what kids are doing to help them," she said.

"I am lucky. I love to write, love kids and love animals. I wish I had the patience to teach kids. I am in awe of the teachers," said Mrs. Curtis.

"I must have had wonderful teachers, I loved being at school," she said.

The soon-to-be terrapin educational site www.terrapinbook.com will be up and running within the next week. The site is funded by a grant from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and managed by the University of Maryland's Biotechnology Institute (UMBI), the Maryland State Department of Education and Mrs. Curtis.

"We've (come) together to help kids learn about turtles," said Mrs. Curtis.

"It will help children learn about this amazing reptile and its need for protection and restoration in its natural habitat. The web site includes school activities, fun facts, and an interactive lab that creates the first comprehensive database on the headstarted terrapins."

The data entered by students will be transmitted online to scientists at UMBI. The site will then provide kids who don't have the opportunity for direct contact with the reptile direct access to learn about it.

Mrs. Curtis is excited that kids can take what they've learned or become interested in while in the classroom and explore it further online.

Mrs. Curtis began writing for newspapers when she was a junior in college and has contributed stories on a freelance basis to a number of magazines. She's also worked in the public relations and marketing field.

A graduate of the University of Maryland, and avid Terps fan, she has a master's degree in Journalism. She grew up in Chartwell in Severna Park and now lives in Arnold with her husband Jim and their two daughters Madison, 9, and Maxine, 5. Both are graduates of Severna Park High School.

"I like to write about the less exotic animals. I love the bay and we have such neat animals here. When you are little, you feel like there is nothing you can do," she said. "Kids are contributing to the survival of these species."

Mrs. Curtis plans to share a percentage of the royalties from "A Turtle in my Sandbox" with the Terrapin Institute in Annapolis, a non-profit public charity and educational organization dedicated to the preservation of the terrapin and its habitat.

The word "terrapin" is derived from an Indian word meaning "a little turtle." The terrapin is one of 19 types of turtles found in Maryland, always live near water, along rivers, ponds, lakes and are often found in brackish, swampy areas.

The book is available on Amazon.com and locally at Caroline's

Cakes in Arnold, Border's and Barnes and Noble bookstores.

Local schools and organizations can request a visit from the author by visiting www.terrapinbook.com or by sending an email to jcurtis@cablespeed.com.

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