

Thinking Outside the Box Turtle: Public Perceptions of an Imperiled Species

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Eastern box turtles (*Terrapene carolina carolina*) experience negative impacts from human activities. Collection for the pet trade or mortalities caused by lawn mowers and vehicles are detrimental to populations, which have experienced rapid decline in Indiana. Understanding perceptions and attitudes held about species can help outreach. This study aims to observe how perceptions and fear response differ between a) genders, b) contact with box turtles, and c) conservation group membership. Mail surveys were administered to 1,378 residents of the Blue River Watershed in Southern Indiana. Respondents rated box turtles on 11 semantic differential pairs and reported their agreement towards a series of Likert-scale questions that measured conservation and fear related attitudes. While fear response was relatively low across groups, women had had a significantly higher fear response (1.71 out of 5) than men (1.53). Women had higher agreement that box turtles are important to the Blue River ecosystem (4.08 vs. 3.77). Respondents who had encountered a box turtle associated box turtles with positive phrases and had higher agreement to ecosystem importance (3.94 vs. 3.39). Members of conservation groups had significantly higher agreement to ecosystem importance (4.25) and approval of government spending on box turtle conservation (3.31) compared to non-members (3.81 and 2.94). There was no correlation between level of fear response and recognition of ecosystem importance. Exposure to box turtles can be a mechanism of instilling positive perceptions of the species. Outreach may not need to address “fearful” perceptions of this species for individuals to still value box turtle conservation.