



'Give Red-bellied Turtles a Brake!'

New fencing on the Mobile Bay Causeway saves turtle lives

By Rebecca Leigh White

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

One would imagine life as a turtle, just like life as a human, has its various ups and downs. For Alabama's official reptile, the struggle to survive has more than the usual challenges because this declining species shares its habitat with many of the state's busiest highways.

That's why the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) is putting on the brakes and being proactive in its efforts to help Alabama's red-bellied turtle population rebound.

ALDOT built a 3.4-mile low-barrier fence along both sides of the Mobile Bay Causeway to prevent access by mature females and their hatchlings, and is also displaying banners along the fence-line to remind passing motorists of turtle nesting and hatching seasons.

Listed as endangered in 1987 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the red-bellied turtle (*Pseudemys alabamensis*) spends the majority of its time lounging

atop half-sunken logs bathed in warm sunlight. However, when Alabama's red-bellied turtles make a move from water to land to nest or hatch their young, the eminent danger from predators becomes a major concern.

Sure, there's a threat from fish, crows, raccoons and feral swine that feed on the turtle eggs, as well as the snakes, alligators, large fish and wading birds that prey on young turtles. But, the biggest danger comes from drivers who may be unaware of the seasons when the red-bellies are on the move and crossing coastal roadways.

Found only in four southern U.S. coastal counties – Baldwin and Mobile in Alabama, and Harrison

and Jackson in Mississippi – this remarkable species is slowly making a comeback thanks to conservation-minded people and organizations who know the red-bellied turtle is one of many wildlife species worth saving. One champion in the fight to save the red-



Turtle fence-barrier on the causeway



belly is Dr. David Nelson, a herpetologist with the University of South Alabama who has been tracking the turtle's population for some time.

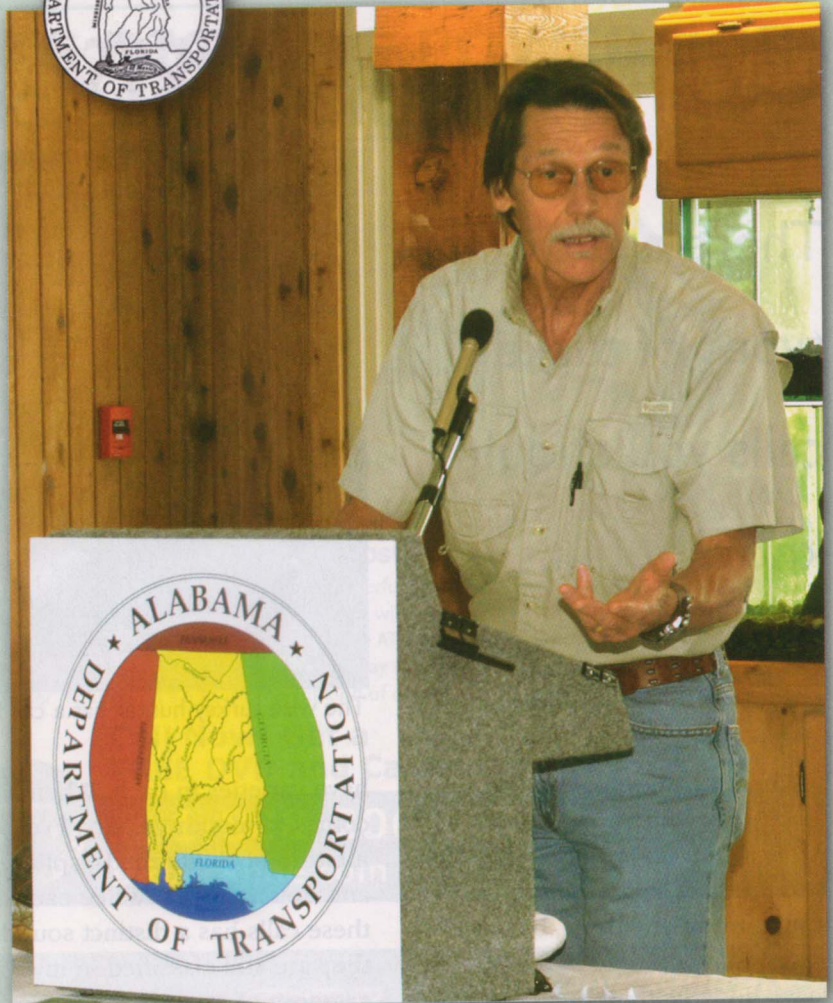
According to Nelson's data, more than 580 turtles were killed on the causeway from 2001-2008. The majority of those were spring hatchlings and females. Since it takes about 15 years for females to mature, losing them at such an alarming rate would deplete the species until they become few and far between. However, the new fence addresses the problem by helping to keep red-bellied turtles out of harm's way.

"Last year, sections of chain-link fencing (a total of 2.6 miles) were financed and installed by the Alabama Department of Transportation to reduce roadway mortality of turtles along the eastern causeway," says Nelson. "Since the construction of the fencing, turtle mortalities have declined significantly, from a total of 109 in 2007, to 28 in 2008."


Monitoring of the fences and turtle mortalities continues.

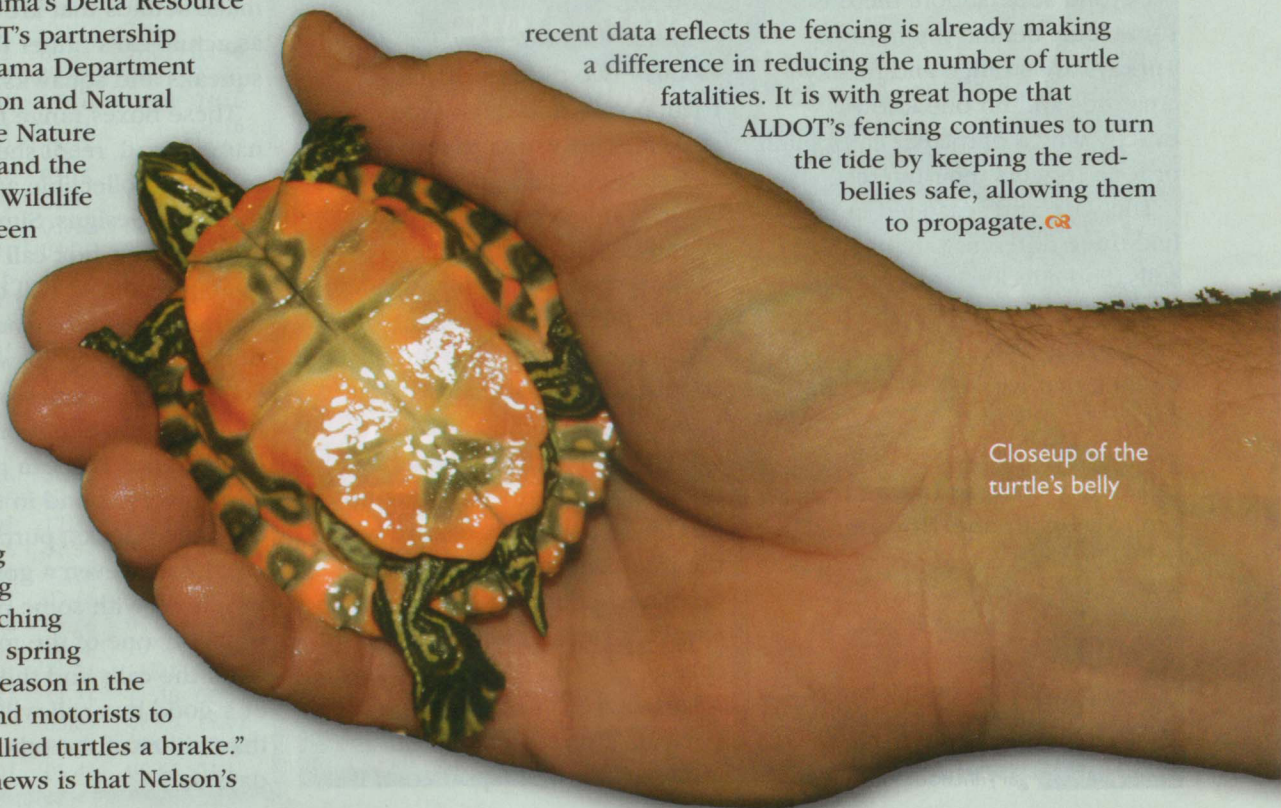
The eco-friendly fencing is concentrated at key points along the causeway including the Blakely and Apalachee rivers and Chacaloochee Bay near 5 Rivers – Alabama's Delta Resource Center. ALDOT's partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been extremely beneficial in protecting habitat areas and raising public awareness of the red-belly's plight. Banners hung on the fencing reflecting hatching season in the spring and nesting season in the fall will remind motorists to "Give Red-bellied turtles a brake."

The good news is that Nelson's



Herpetologist Dr. David Nelson of the University of South Alabama

recent data reflects the fencing is already making a difference in reducing the number of turtle fatalities. It is with great hope that ALDOT's fencing continues to turn the tide by keeping the red-bellies safe, allowing them to propagate. 



Closeup of the turtle's belly