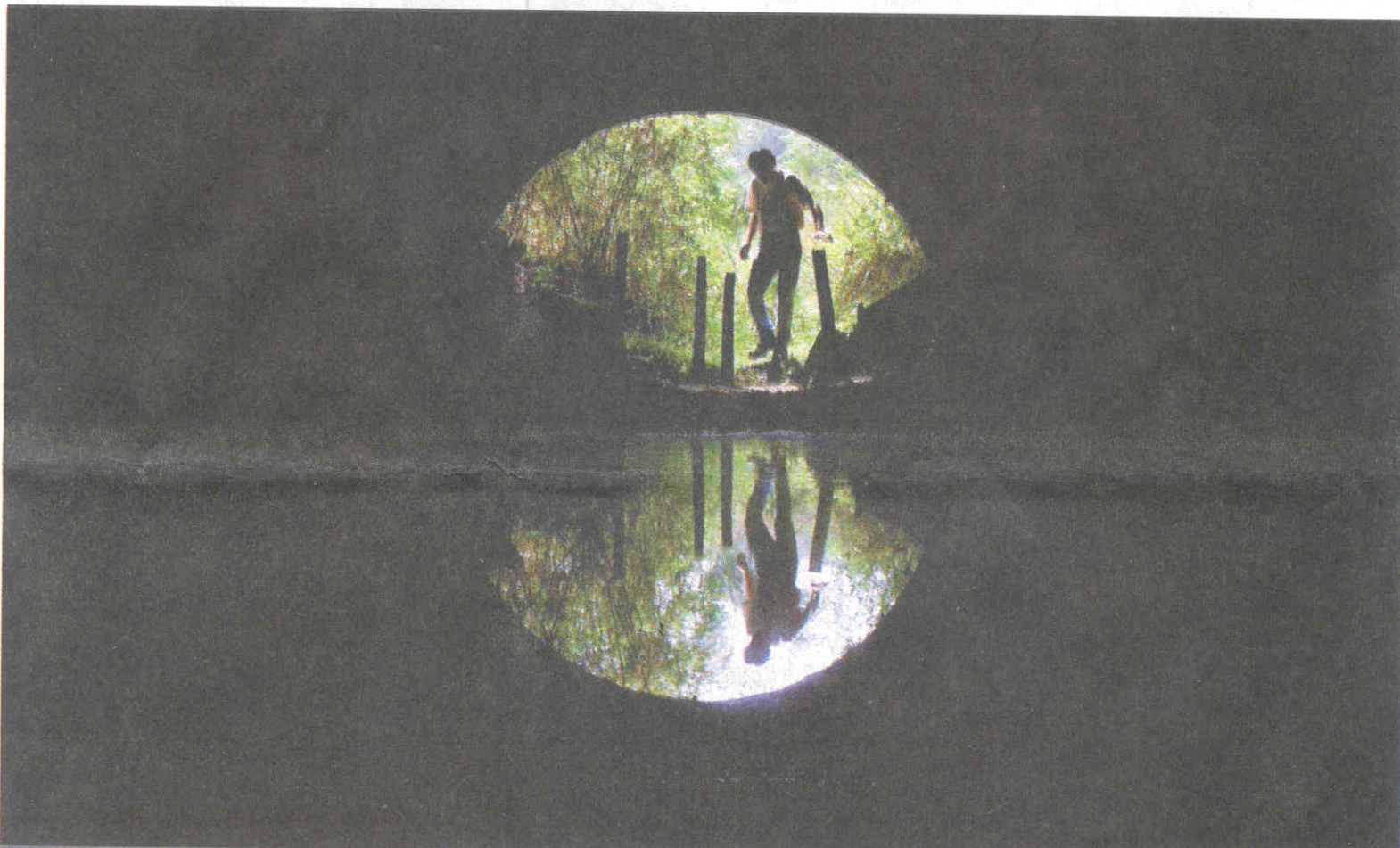


Saving Turtles Is Slow Work

A man wages a lengthy crusade to get state financing for culverts that keep critters from becoming roadkill.



Aresco marks a turtle's shell for identification purposes before releasing it in Little Lake Jackson.



Matt Aresco, a biology student at Florida State University, checks for turtles in a drainage culvert that runs under U.S. 27 in Tallahassee.

Tribune photos by COLIN HACKLEY

By JIM TUNSTALL
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TALLAHASSEE— Matt Aresco's fascination with turtles began in a backyard swamp.

Thirty-four years later, he's one of their guardian angels.

While working on — and substantially delaying — his doctorate in biology, Aresco has made daily sweeps near his home, seven miles north of the capital. He spends three to 10 hours a day at Lake Jackson on turtle patrols.

On good days, he saves scores of Florida cooters, yellow-bellied sliders, softshells and stinkpots, picking them up and carrying them to safety as they walk along or try to cross U.S. 27, which cuts through the lake.

On bad days, he collects their carcasses.

"This area has the highest number of documented [turtle] crossings in North America," said Aresco, a 39-year-old student at Florida State University.

In the 29 months since he first saw the carnage on the highway, he has recorded more than 9,000 attempted crossings.

He has invested time, muscle and money to install a

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Getting state to act could take years.



Aresco's crusade also involves asking the state to build a permanent barrier and more culverts under U.S. 27. A system of that sort on U.S. 441 has been effective.



Tribune photos by COLIN HACKLEY

Aresco repairs a nylon fence he built two years ago to prevent turtles from crossing U.S. 27. The fence has limited effectiveness, as species such as mature softshell and snapping turtles can get through the barrier.

TURTLE GUARDIAN

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black nylon silt fence to herd smaller turtles toward a lone culvert under the busy highway.

In some cases, the journey is as much as a half mile, which is why the turtle man of Tallahassee carries many of the critters to safety, sometimes to a backdrop of catcalls from passing hecklers, but just as frequently to supporting honks.

As noble as the effort is, Aresco's fence has limited effectiveness. Larger species such as mature softshell and snapping turtles, alligators and otters rumble over or through the flimsy barrier — many getting crushed before reaching the other side. Ditto for snakes and frogs.

That's why Aresco launched a one-man crusade to get the Florida Department of Transportation to cough up money for a concrete barrier and culverts similar to those completed last year on U.S. 441 in Paynes Prairie State Preserve, south of Gainesville.

In that case, staff docu-



This yellow-bellied slider likely won't end up as roadkill after being relocated in Little Lake Jackson. The turtles naturally migrate from one side of the lake to the other, looking for mates.

mented 34,354 animal deaths on the highway during a five-year period that ended in 1995. That number included 31,794 frogs and 1,061 snakes. The others were deer, otters, armadillos, raccoons, alligators, vultures and birds of prey such as eagles and hawks that stopped to eat roadkill.

DOT eventually spent more than \$3 million to install a 3½-foot-high, 2-mile-long concrete barrier on both sides

of the road. The state also doubled the number of culverts running beneath the highway to eight. Wildlife use the culverts to move from place to place, said David O'Neill, spokesman for the Paynes Prairie Wildlife Coalition, the activist group responsible for getting the state to take action.

"We're hoping to get them to do the same thing on I-75, but the carnage was worse on [U.S.] 441," he said.

Back in Tallahassee, U.S. 27 cuts through Lake Jackson, carving it into two sections, the smaller being a 40-acre pool known as Little Lake Jackson.

The turtles naturally migrate from one side to the other, looking for mates, nesting sites or new turf.

They're most active during droughts, such as a severe one in 1999 when the lake's sinkholes sucked much of it dry.

At rush hour, Aresco said, the highway is a conveyor belt, averaging 36,500 cars during a 24-hour period.

"When the lake dried the last time," he said, "I was driving on [U.S.] 27 one day and saw over 20 dead turtles, all fresh. I got out and walked a third of a mile and found 90 more carcasses."

In one three-month span in the spring of 2000, he collected 439 dead turtles.

That's when he began installing the fence. So far, he has spent \$2,000.

"But it's only temporary and it's degrading rapidly," Aresco said.

So he's pushing harder to get the state to build a permanent barrier and more culverts.

He has a Web site — www.lakejacksonturtles.org — to tell others about the turtles' plight and to urge them to lobby officials for help.

To date, DOT has donated some of the fence Aresco installed but hasn't agreed to do more.

DOT spokesman Tommy Speights said Aresco and his supporters must follow procedure.

That means getting the county to propose the barrier as a project for federal aid and getting the local metropolitan planning organization to prioritize and rank it.

Then, maybe, DOT will consider action.

The county appears to be behind Aresco, but Jim Weimer, a biologist at Paynes Prairie, said the solution might be years away.

"I started counting roadkill [on U.S. 441] in 1989," 12 years before that barrier was completed, he said.

"To DOT's credit, it's a big jump for them to admit responsibility for the environment around a road and do something about it."

The good news: Now that they're completed, the barriers "are shockingly effective," Weimer said.

"The mortality has almost evaporated."

Reporter Jim Tunstall can be reached at (352) 628-5558.

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