

A Test of BRDs and Escape Hatches in Commercial-Style Crab Traps

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The Issue: Virginia is the only mid-Atlantic state without a BRD regulation in its blue crab fishery, owing largely to the pushback from commercial crabbers. BRDs are perceived as a solution to a problem that doesn't exist. The mass drowning of terrapins in commercial-style traps, however, suggests otherwise:



The Research: Rather than excluding terrapins with BRDs, let them into pots and then provide an “escape hatch” to push their way out:



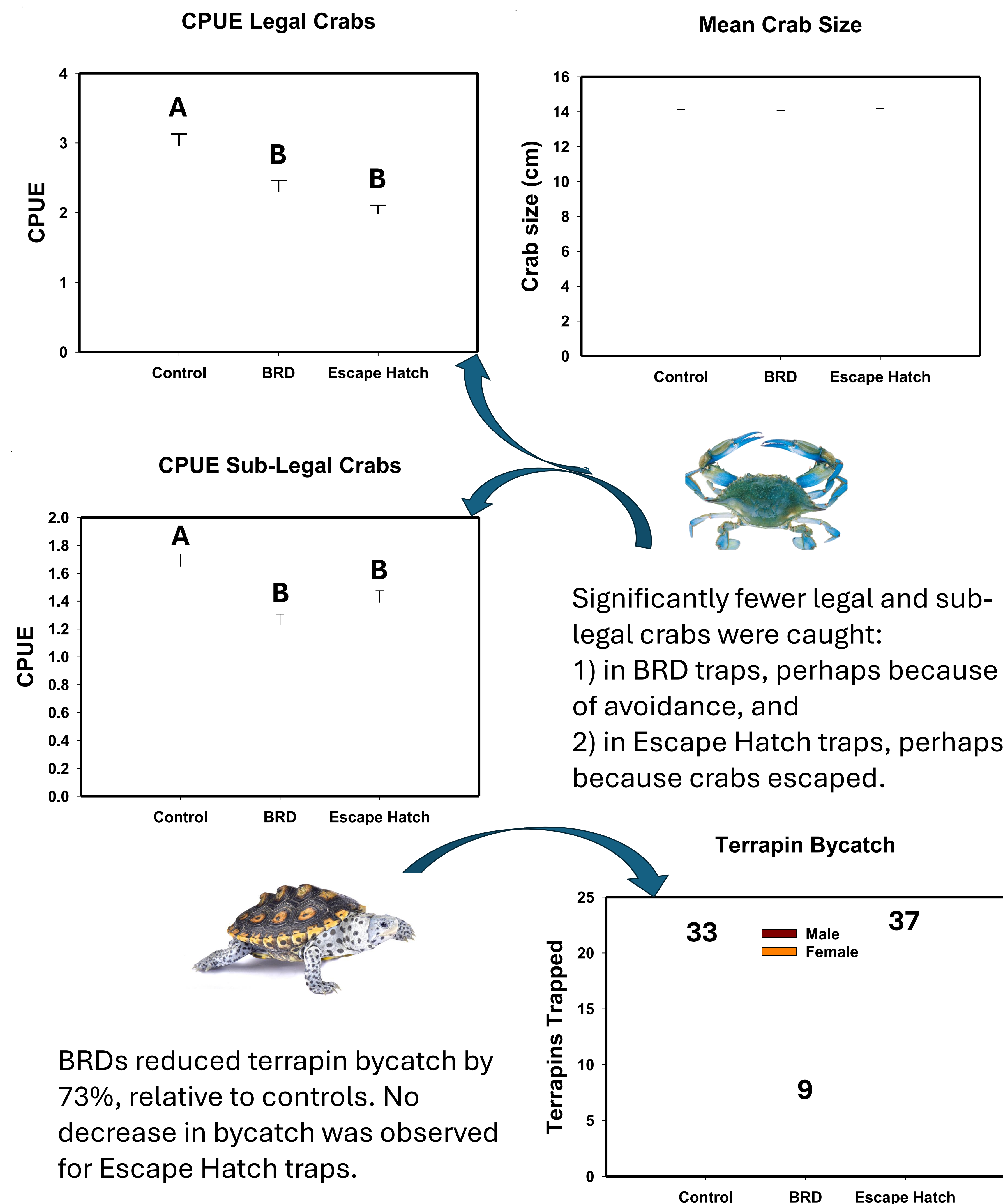
Method: Field trials compared crab catch and terrapin bycatch in traps fitted with BRDs or an escape hatch, versus controls. All traps had 5-ft mesh chimneys to give terrapins access to air:



Twelve traps of each trap design were fished in two tidal creeks during June and July 2025. Crab catch and terrapin bycatch were recorded by sex and size.



Results: 1509 legal crabs were captured over the summer. From 208 trap days for each trap design, the catch per unit effort varied, but the mean crab size did not:



Summary: Control traps caught the most crabs but also had a high bycatch of terrapins. Escape Hatch traps had a smaller crab catch and no decrease in terrapin bycatch. BRD traps reduced crab catch by ~22% but also decreased terrapin bycatch by 73%.



Exclude or Escape?? The escape hatch had shown some promise in prior lab and field trials but was ineffective at reducing terrapin bycatch in the current study. Given their ability to exclude terrapins with only a modest reduction in crab catch, BRDs are the preferred mitigation strategy to conserve terrapins in the blue crab fishery.



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