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SHELL STRUCK IN FLORIDA

When a young herpetologist discovered how many turtles were getting creamed on a busy Tallahassee highway, he stuck his neck out to save them **BY RENE EBERSOLE**

Matt Aresco couldn't help but notice the big, bloody turtle shells strewn up and down the northbound lane of U.S. Highway 27 along the edge of Lake Jackson in Tallahassee, Florida. Some were almost entirely intact. Others were shattered. Hitting the brakes, he eased off the highway, climbed out and started walking. Pausing to investigate each carcass, the 38-year-old herpetologist began stacking them on a large blue tarp. Before long, the pile stood 90 shells high and represented 10 different species.

Aresco sent photographs of the gruesome stack to the Florida Department of Transportation with a letter calling for a solution: a system of fences and underground passageways that would direct turtles safely beneath the highway. When the agency replied that it didn't have the funding for such a wildlife crossing, or "ecopassage," Aresco founded a nonprofit organization, the Lake Jackson Ecopassage Alliance, to lobby government offi-

cial to find the funding. He also launched a one-man, backbreaking crusade to protect the lake's remaining Florida cooters, softshells, sliders and other turtles from more fatal encounters with rubber and steel.

In four years, the renegade herpetologist has dodged countless 18-wheelers, SUVs, two-door sedans and motorcycles while building and maintaining temporary cloth fences that keep the turtles from sticking their necks into traffic. He has also shuttled more than 8,000 of the animals in large plastic bins across the busy four-lane highway. "I take it personally if one gets killed," he says.

Highway 27 isn't the only roadway wreaking havoc on wildlife. "There are hundreds and thousands of places like this," says Bill Ruediger, U.S. Forest Service ecology program leader for highways. "But there aren't a lot of people like Matt who are willing to be the catalyst to make change." In the



AS MATT Aresco shuttles turtles across busy Highway 27, he records the animals' measurements (left) and tags them so he knows when he recaptures individuals. In four years, he's carried most of Lake Jackson's Florida cooters (above), softshells, sliders and other turtles across the road at least once.

1970s, the Humane Society of the United States estimated that roughly 1 million animals perish daily on highways. Today, with more roads and more drivers, those numbers could be higher.

When talking about an ecopassage design that would end his turtle ferrying days, Aresco often points to Florida's U.S. 441—once known as the deadliest road in the Sunshine State for frogs, snakes and raccoons. The highway's new Paynes Prairie Ecopassage includes, among other things, a concrete wall crowned with a "lip" so that reptiles can't climb over. "Before the ecopassage, hundreds of thousands of animals were dying," says Kenneth Dodd, the principal U.S. Geological Survey investigator who conducted a before and after assessment of the site. "Afterward, animal mortality went down by more than 90 percent."

Dodd adds "there's no doubt" an ecopassage would help the problem on Highway 27, which currently holds of the title for deadliest highway. And largely because of Matt Aresco's tenacity, the chances of the ecopassage being built look promising.

The state recently launched a \$100,000 Lake Jackson Ecopassage Feasibility Study with the goal of determining the structure's design. It could still take several years before Aresco's dream comes to fruition. "The wheels of government move slowly," he says. But he plans to continue his daily turtle patrols and constant fence repair for "as long as it takes."

