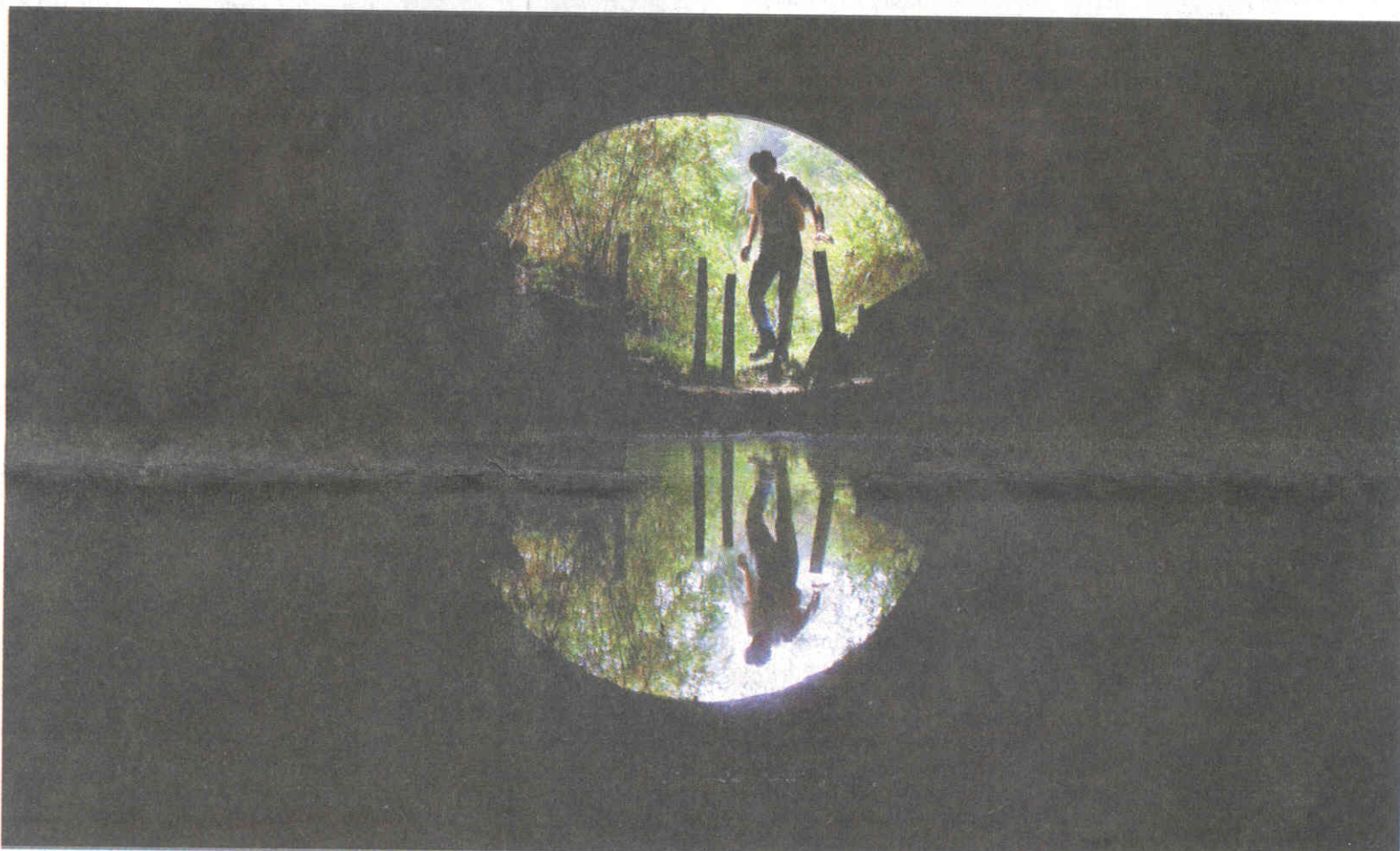


Saving Turtles Is Slow Work

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.



Tribune photos by COLIN HACKLEY

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

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

See **TURTLE GUARDIAN**, Page 6 ►
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.

