

Crabs get a visit from afar

By Gwen Guerke, Milford Chronicle

SLAUGHTER BEACH — The ancient horseshoe crab brought international visitors to its spawning grounds on the Delaware Bay last weekend.

A contingent of scientists participating in the 2007 International Symposium on the Science and Conservation of Horseshoe Crabs June 11 to 14 at Dowling College on Long Island, N.Y. extended their stay for a field trip arranged by Glenn Gauvry, president of the Lewes-based Ecological Research and Development Group.

Mr. Gauvry, a planner and presenter at the symposium, procured funding and support for a portion of the trip from the state tourism office, the Cape May- Lewes ferry, the St. Jones Reserve and the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary.

The 22-member group spent Friday night in Dover. After dining at Sambo's in Leipsic, the group traveled to Pickering Beach to watch horseshoe crabs spawn. For scientist in Japan, Canada and Denmark, the ritual was a rare sight indeed. "In other countries, the population is decimated, so when they saw 200 crabs in Port Mahon, to some, it was more than they had seen at one time in their lives, and when they saw thousands at Pickering Beach, it was incredible," said Mr. Gauvry.



Glenn Gauvry, president of the nonprofit Ecological Research & Development Group (ERDG)

The trip continued Saturday with stops at the St. Jones Reserve and the newly opened DuPont Nature Center at Mispillion Reserve. Then the group walked along Slaughter Beach to the pavilion for a barbecue, including a clambake, prepared by Garth Stubbolo, a middle school science teacher in Middletown, and a friend of Mr. Gauvry.

Mr. Stubbolo uses a DNREC curriculum called “Green Eggs and Sand” with his students, and Gary Kreamer, one of the developers of that environmental education program, was also on hand to greet guests as they walked along the Delaware Bay shoreline.

Mr. Kreamer said “Green Eggs and Sand” started as a collaborative project in 2000 and was launched as a pilot program a year later. Since then, he has presented 18 workshops for teachers, not just in Delaware, but also from Massachusetts to Florida.

The curriculum is geared toward middle school students and presents the horseshoe crab, as well as its impact on the shorebirds, the fishermen, the local economy and the medical community.

“It’s used by 800 educators in 20 states,” Mr. Kreamer added. “We thought the interest would die out, but it’s just been ramping up. They are not cute cuddly creatures. It’s more about trying to manage our natural resources, to have sustainable resources and still keep everybody happy,” he said.

David Rudkin, assistant curator of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto was one of the visitors. A paleontologist, he studies fossils records. “The horseshoe crab is considered a living fossil. It goes back farther than we thought, 445 million years old,” he said. “These guys are true survivors.”

Tobias Wang from Denmark is a scientist studying the physiology of the horseshoe crab, specifically its heart and gills, in order to learn how long it can tolerate being out of water. He gingerly carried the shell of a baby horseshoe crab, one he picked up from walking the beach.

Mr. Gauvry said the goal of the symposium and field trip was to increase cooperation and communication among scientists, watermen, environmentalists and medical communities in other countries.

It’s a mission he’s worked hard on in his own backyard. “We don’t realize what we have here. It’s like nowhere else in the

world. We're taking science to the community," he said.

Slaughter Beach is officially designated as an ERDG horseshoe crab sanctuary, as are Broadkill, Kitts Hummock, Prime Hook, Fowler and Pickering beaches.

Bill McSpadden, a full-time resident of Slaughter Beach, has been working on the town's comprehensive plan and it's nearly ready for state scrutiny. Several years ago, he and his wife noticed a decline in the horseshoe crab population at the beach, voiced their concerns to neighbors and approached town council.

After surveying residents, the town officially became a designated sanctuary in 2004. Instead of paying contractors to haul off dead crabs, residents flip the live crabs after spawning so the crabs can make their way back to the bay.

But horseshoe crabs aren't the only protected species; so are the diamondback terrapins and the shorebirds. Mr. McSpadden said the animals are included in the draft comprehensive plan. "We look at it as a growth issue. We are stewards of where we live," he said.