

Thousands of horseshoe crabs perish

Dead or dying crabs caught as rains block escape route

By JAMES MERRIWEATHER / *The News Journal*

06/09/2005

The pile of dead horseshoe crabs kept getting bigger and bigger.

The crabs were trapped Wednesday after being washed from the Delaware Bay over flood-prone Port Mahon Road and into a slough in far eastern Kent County.

That wasn't all that unusual -- it happens a lot at high tide during horseshoe crab spawning season.

But this time there was no escape because drainage pipes, about a half-mile west of the Port Mahon fishing pier, were filled with sand by recent storms, depriving the displaced crabs of a route back to the bay.

State officials said the result was perhaps 2,000 dead and dying crabs in the shallow muddy water of the slough, part of 5,000 acres of mostly state-owned tidal marsh on the road's north side.

"It has happened here before, but the crabs, for the most part, were able to get back," said Stewart Michels, a fisheries scientist who spearheaded a last-ditch effort Wednesday to save as many crabs as possible.

The rescue effort -- manned early on by a nine-inmate crew from the Central Violation of Probation Center in Dover -- did not get under way until about noon.

"I think it was just hard to get a crew together," said Maria Taylor, a spokeswoman for the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control.

Judging by occasional bursts of salty language, the inmates were not particularly thrilled by their role in the salvage effort. They typically would check crabs for signs of life, grab as many as six live ones by their tails, walk across Port Mahon Road and, using a fling-for-distance approach, return them to the bay. There was nothing dainty about the process.

"What's this all about, sir?" one inmate asked at one point.

"To save some crabs," Michels responded. "They're very valuable to migratory shorebirds."

A day earlier, environmental groups had called for an end to the Delaware Bay horseshoe crab harvest, and top regulators in Delaware and New Jersey signaled that they might heed the call. Migratory shorebirds, particularly the endangered red knot, feed on the crab's eggs during a 6,500-mile migration from South America to the arctic.

The inmates left in two shifts, with the last five departing about two hours after the rescue began. Michels became a one-man rescue squad before he was eventually joined by Wayne Lehman, who manages all state wildlife areas in Kent County, and Ken Hurley, a conservationist with the Division of Fish and Wildlife.

Commercial fisherman Charles Auman, who uses horseshoe crabs as bait for eel and conch, had mocked environmentalists Tuesday for what he considered an attempt to deprive him of his livelihood with a total ban on harvesting crabs.



He noted that countless numbers of crabs die natural deaths -- becoming disoriented on land and unable to find their way back to the water or ending up on their backs and unable to right themselves.

"These radicals would rather see the crabs crawl up on a beach and die than see a fisherman get them," Auman said.

Contact James Merriweather at 678-4273 or jmerriweather@delawareonline.com.

Stuart Michels, a fisheries scientist with the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, tosses a horseshoe crab during rescue efforts Wednesday.