

DOVER POST

Local News

Kitts Hummock forms sanctuary for horseshoe crabs

By ESTHER WHIELDON
Staff writer

Melaine Morford of Kitts Hummock walks down the shoreline in sand-dyed canvas sneakers. She's hunting for live horseshoe crabs to flip right side-up. It's less than an hour before high tide and already hundreds of the hard-shelled creatures are congregating to spawn.

She and some other waterfront homeowners share the flipping responsibility without special planning.

"We sort of communicate with foot prints," she said.

The Kitts Hummock shorefront became a horseshoe crab sanctuary through the state in November 2002, making it illegal for waterman to harvest horseshoe crabs.

The waterfront is about two and one-half miles long with about 60 residences north and south, said Hiram Godwin, Kitts Hummock Improvement Association President, South Bay Drive.

Under DNREC regulations, shoreline residents can together register their land as a horseshoe crab sanctuary. Broadkill Beach was the first Delaware community to make its shoreline of about three miles a sanctuary in 2000. Kitts Hummock was the second.

Morford spearheaded the sanctuary campaign.



A CRABBY SHORELINE: Horseshoe crabs dot the shoreline on Kitts Hummock beach. The crabs come ashore on high tides during the full and new moons, primarily in May and June. Halfway up the photo is an upside-down crab. The waves may flip a crab when it tries to mount the female. Photos by Esther Whieldon.

She contacted Glenn Gauvry, president of the Ecological Research and Development Group (ERDG) of Lewes.

ERDG is a non-profit wildlife conservation organization primarily focused on preserving the world's four remaining horseshoe crab species. Founded in 1995, the group works through education and research to 'inspire' people to act, and promotes a 'healthy' partnership between industry, governments, environmental groups and communities.

Until Morford called Gauvry, ERDG hadn't considered campaigning at Kitts Hummock. There's a large cross-section of homeowners, including waterman, he said.

Gauvry and Morford began educating the residents and encouraging the community to stop the harvesting at Kitts Hummock.

Some residents resented the smell of rotting crabs, among other things, Morford said. But as they learned more about the crabs and possible benefits of being a sanctuary, she said the tide of opinion turned. For example, flipping crabs can reduce the number of dead crabs along the shore, she said.

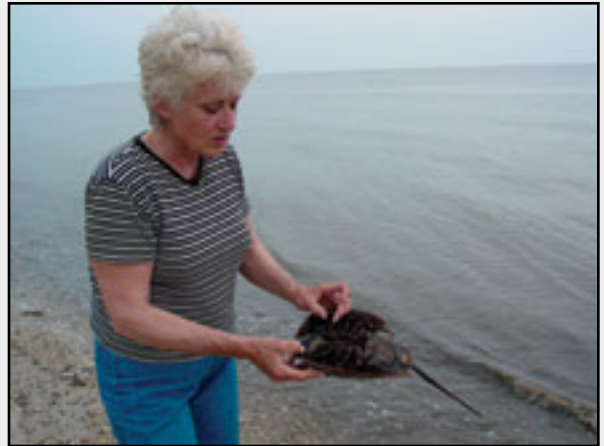
Gauvry said it's good to get individuals to act as an alternative to government intervention.

"We're very much against the over regulation that goes on," he said.

Protecting the crabs is somewhat easier for Morford, even though there's still one man trying to harvest illegally, she said. Without the designation of sanctuary, individual property owners in Kitts Hummock could give licensed harvesters permission to use the land.

"To have the sanctuary is a great peace of mind," she said. "Last year, I shed a lot of tears because of trying to get help."

The Kitts Hummock Improvement Association finalized the sanctuary by mailing a letter of intent to waterfront residences. It gave a response deadline and noted that silence would



SHE KNOWS HER CRABS: Melaine Morford, of Kitts Hummock, holds a male horseshoe crab upside down as she describes the gender differences. The claw Morford holds with her left hand, called pedipalps, only grow on males. The claws latch onto the back shell of a female as she lays her eggs. Males are about 20% smaller than the females, and the front of their shells curve in slightly.



SPAWNING CRABS: A female horseshoe crab digs deep down in the sand along the water's edge. Three males attempt to fertilize her eggs. Clusters like this are typical. Horseshoe crabs must be adults of about 9 to 11 years old before they can spawn. Photo by Esther Whieldon.

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be viewed as an affirmation.

There were no negative responses, Godwin said.

If ever the association decides to remove its status, a majority would again be necessary, said Roy Miller, DNREC administrator of fisheries.

Not everyone joined the sanctuary movement to save horseshoes.

Like many other Delaware shorelines, Kitts Hummock's is eroding away.

Godwin heard that becoming a sanctuary might encourage the government to add sand to the beach.

"I'll join any sanctuary as long as they get some sand pumped in," he said.

Horseshoe crabs are harvested to use as bait for eel and conch, which are especially popular food items in southern United States, the Cayman Islands, and certain Asian countries.

There are two kinds of licensed horseshoe crab harvesters: those who pick up by hand, and those who use dredges to scoop-up horseshoe crabs. All 38 licensed harvesters normally collect by hand; of that number five are chosen by lottery to be dredgers for the year, Miller said.

"This year I got lucky enough to get picked on the lottery for dredging," said Frank Gorski, a licensed harvester from North Bowers Beach.

Hand horseshoe crab harvester Charles Auman, of Slaughter Beach, who was not one of the five picked to dredge this year, said Kitt's Hummock decision is a sour point to him.

The government already owns a majority of shore land, and when communities add their property to the list, there's even less space for harvesters to use, he said.

"There's not much more they can do to beat us to the ground," he said.

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Horseshoe crabs have value other than as bait. They are tremendously important to the bay ecosystem, said Stew Michels, DNREC fishery scientist.

Around 11 migratory bird species depend on fresh horseshoe crab eggs during their stopover along the Delaware Bay. The eggs restock their fat supply that is needed for the second part of the migration from South America to the Arctic.

The red knot is especially dependent on the eggs, Michels said.

“If you get a newly arrived bird, it’s just like a bag of bones,” he said. “If you hold one that’s been here a couple of weeks it’s like a butterball.”

They also serve as food for finfish and loggerhead sea turtles, he said.

Horseshoes have value in the medical world as well.

Horseshoe crab blood is important because it contains Limulus Amoebocyte Lysate (LAL), which is used to detect the presence of dangerous bacteria in injectible drugs and surgical implants such as pacemakers and prosthetic devices. According to DNREC, no horseshoe crabs collected in Delaware are used for biomedical purposes.

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