

Our Readers' Views

06/18/2005

Horseshoe crabs are sustainable without stringent limits on fishery

Environmental activists, led by New Jersey's Endangered and Nongame Species Program and New Jersey Audubon, continue their misrepresentation of statistics in support of their narrow ecological vision of closing the Delaware Bay horseshoe crab fishery. Their oversimplification of the red knot migratory bird problem as exclusive to the Delaware Bay is intentional, and should be rejected by natural resource policy makers at the state and federal levels.

They have attempted to argue that low egg counts this May indicate an alarming decline in the horseshoe crab population. The low egg counts in May were the result of cold spring temperatures and predictably late horseshoe crab spawning activity. The current body of science does not support their extreme position.

The Delaware Bay horseshoe crab spawner survey confirms that spawning has been stable at the baywide level for the past five years. The current horseshoe crab harvest represents an annual removal rate of approximately 3 percent of the Delaware Bay population. This low removal rate is sustainable, biologically insignificant and will allow for rebuilding of the stock. Horseshoe crabs take nine to 12 years to reach maturity. The stable population trajectory is not biologically inconsistent with a recovery.

Furthermore, the migratory shorebirds of the Delaware Bay, including the red knot, made departure weights in 2004, confirming there were enough horseshoe crabs in the bay to meet the birds' energy requirements in 2004. Subsequent declines in the rufa subpopulation of red knots are consequently attributable to other factors outside of the Delaware Bay, like late snowfalls on the arctic breeding grounds.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Interstate Management Plan for Horseshoe Crabs slashed harvesting by 65 percent or more and closed the harvest in the Delaware Bay from May 1 through June 7, affording maximum protection for migratory shorebirds. The stated goal is to manage horseshoe crabs as a multi-user resource for the benefit of the fishing and non-fishing public as well as shorebirds.

The fisheries of the Mid-Atlantic are scientifically and legally justified in seeking continued, reasonable use of the resource under the highly risk-averse constraints of the management plan. To manage horseshoe crabs for the sole benefit of shorebirds and activist constituencies, as New Jersey proposes, would contravene the goal of the ASMFC plan and would prejudice the rights of the other user groups.

Richard B. Robins Jr., Chesapeake Bay Packing, Advisor, ASMFC Horseshoe Crab Management Board, Newport News, Va.