

CAPE GAZETTE

6/17/05

Mispillion Inlet: a mix of watermen, waterfowl and horseshoe crabs

*By Jim Cresson
Cape Gazette staff*

The Mispillion Inlet, where the Mispillion River and Cedar Creek empty into the Delaware Bay, is a special place.

It is the scene of a battle between watermen trying to save their livelihood and a state they see as trying to take it from them.

It is also the scene of an age-old natural connection between spawning horseshoe crabs and hungry, migratory shorebirds.

Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) purchased the former Mispillion Lighthouse restaurant property overlooking the inlet and constructed a large, elevated observation deck, where birders can watch as red knots, ruddy turnstones, sanderlings, black-bellied plovers and semipalmated plovers arrive each May to feast on millions of tiny green horseshoe crab eggs laid on Delaware Bay beaches.

Four small beach strands along the rock walls of Mispillion Inlet provide some of the most abundant sources of horseshoe crab eggs in all of Delaware.

“This Mispillion Inlet property is the rarest spot on Earth,” said Charles Auman, a commercial waterman who owns a fresh seafood wholesale business and hundreds of feet of waterfront at the inlet. “But I believe our fishing industry is doomed in Delaware, and I’m going to have to leave this spot someday.”

Auman’s That’s Right Fresh Seafood business is the only remaining waterfront-based wholesale seafood house in Delaware. Commercial watermen harvest horseshoe crabs from state-designated bay beaches for two weeks in June, or until the state’s annual harvest quota of 150,000 crabs is filled.

Many of the 80 licensed commercial watermen in Delaware take their catch to Auman’s seafood house, where he buys the crabs.

Auman and most of the veteran watermen in Delaware have seen their annual horseshoe crab harvest quotas cut from a high of 500,000 crabs in the mid-1990s to the all-time low quota now in place. The low quota is meant to help ensure that horseshoe crab populations do not decline as they did during the 1990s. Without a healthy crab population in the Delaware Bay, the migratory shorebirds might stop coming to the bay beaches. If the birds stop coming, the state could lose its prominence as a bird-watching location each spring.

Tool for scientists

Because state officials want to ensure the annual crab harvest is accurately counted, the Fish and Wildlife Division this week sent agents to Mispillion Inlet and other strategic locations to check the daily harvests and monitor the size and sex of the crabs.

“The horseshoe crab is an ancient and defenseless creature,” said DNREC Secretary John Hughes when he initiated the crab-checking program under an emergency order June 14. “They need all the help they can get, including restricted and accurate counting of the takes.”

Fish and wildlife agent Michael Friel explained the crab checking program as he stood under the hot sun in a dusty parking lot at the inlet, June 15.

“We’re developing a measuring tool for scientists,” said Friel. “When a waterman comes with his daily catch, we measure the length, width and depth of his crab container to get the cubic feet. Then we randomly select 30 crabs. We measure the width of their shells at the widest point and we check their sex. Then we estimate the number of crabs in the waterman’s load. That way, we get a very good estimate of the crab harvest, and a good estimate of how many males and females were among the load.”

Other crab-counting efforts are carried out each spring as hundreds of volunteers participate in crab sampling as the ancient mariners come ashore at high tides on the lunar cycles during May and June. Dr. Bill Hall of the University of Delaware College of Marine Studies in Lewes coordinates those counts, collecting the data gathered by volunteers on both sides of the bay.

Hall said the crab counts have declined steadily over the past five years, giving state officials in Delaware and New Jersey reason to mull further restrictions on the harvest.

“In recent years, the state has cut an 8-week season down to two weeks,” said Auman. “All we have now is the ability to harvest from a half-mile beach at Port Mahon Road on Tuesdays and Thursdays. If there is any quota left after the beach harvesting ends, we can begin trawling July 1, but that won’t last long.”

Families have to eat

A call by environmental activists for the states of Delaware and New Jersey to halt the taking of horseshoe crabs this summer has not been taken up by Delaware. But watermen are wary that the halt may come next season.

Steve Bennett is a waterman whose family has owned a farm on Fowler Beach Road for six generations. As Bennett arrived at Auman’s seafood business with the crabs he picked from Port Mahon Road, June 15, he talked about the future of his livelihood.

“I’m all for conservation,” said Bennett. “It represents the future of my business. But I simply haven’t seen the science that proves we’re hurting the horseshoe crab population. Maybe we took too many in the 1990s, but that was 10 years ago. Our short and site-restricted harvesting season now doesn’t harm the resource. If the state takes that away from us, the whole fisheries industry will collapse. If we don’t have horseshoe crabs, then we can’t fish for eels or conchs. If we can’t fish for them, we won’t make it. The state should lighten up on us. We have to work, and our families have to eat.”

Auman calls the fisheries industry one of the hardest-working trades he knows.

“I don’t know whether the federal government will put the red knot on the endangered list like the bird people want,” said Auman, who has served on the state’s shell-fisheries advisory board since 1990. “But I do know that commercial watermen are on the endangered list. I worked all

my life to get this business going, and my apprentices have worked hard to create a trade of their own. If the state closes the horseshoe crab harvest next year, we're all done.”