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Moratorium on horseshoe crabs rejected by ASMFC

By Rachel Swick
Cape Gazette staff

The federal fisheries board has rejected a proposal that could have placed a moratorium on all horseshoe crab takes for two years.

Instead, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission decided Tuesday, May 9, to limit East Coast watermen to 100,000 male horseshoe crabs hauled in each year for use as bait. The idea is to protect the female horseshoe crabs, which lay eggs, starting in mid-May. The eggs are needed to sustain the large shorebird populations that visit Delaware each year.

The proposed moratorium was not well received by everyone. Some felt its effect on watermen would be catastrophic - enough to close down some fishing operations that depend on the horseshoe crabs for bait.

Glenn Gauvry, president of the Ecological Research and Development Group (ERDG) in Lewes, said the proposed moratorium would not have solved all the environmental questions circulating around wildlife impacts associated with horseshoe crabs.

"It has been reported in the papers that some environmental organizations feel that the harvesting moratorium, recently imposed in New Jersey, represents a bright moment for all those who enjoy watching wildlife," said Gauvry. "But, ERDG does not share in that opinion. We feel it is a sad day for humanity, when extremism wins over balanced public policy."

Gauvry said the decision made by the fisheries board falls in line with what his company proposed at the public hearings held in both Maryland and Delaware last month.

He said research submitted to the fisheries commission and Delaware and New Jersey officials by world-renowned authority on crabs, Dr. Carl Shuster, supports the sustainability of a males-only harvest, for the proposed two-year period.

Besides being used as bait, the horseshoe crab is also used in the biomedical industry. The unique blue blood of the crab is used successfully for testing scientific equipment. It was reported that in 2004 the biomedical industry trapped, bled and released approximately 292,760 crabs.

Fall of the red knot

One of the most threatened shorebird species, the red knot, depends on the horseshoe crab eggs to survive the final leg of migration, beginning at the southernmost tip of Chile and culminating at the breeding grounds in the Arctic. The eggs found along the sandy islands on Delaware's coast provide sustenance that almost doubles the red knot's size, giving it the energy to finish the trip.

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Red knot populations have decreased in recent years, and scientists question whether the decline may be related to decreased horseshoe crab populations.

Sarah Cooksey, a biologist working at the Mispillion River, said scientists do not agree on why red knot populations are down or even if it related to something happening in Delaware.

“It is true that red knot population numbers are down historically, along with many other birds,” said Cooksey. “Scientists differ on the cause. Some scientists think the availability of horseshoe crab eggs is the most important issue. Some scientists think habitat in South America is more important than availability of horseshoe crabs in Delaware Bay. Some think something else is going on in the Arctic where they breed.”

Cooksey said the Delaware Bay region is like an ecological bottleneck for many species, in that it is a necessary habitat to continue the species and that if something goes wrong here, it has far-reaching environmental impacts.

Cooksey and several other Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control officials are working to negotiate a contract that would use hydrodynamic modeling at the Mispillion River to determine where improvements could be made. Several problems currently exist at the Mispillion, including problems with navigation because of shallow waters from deposited sediment, a dilapidated jetty and eroded habitats for shorebirds and horseshoe crabs. Cooksey said the modeling could come up with a solution for all of these problems.

Dave Carter, environmental program manager for DNREC’s coastal programs division, said it is not often that several problems can be solved with one project, but this is the exception. He said the modeling will show flow and sediment dispersal, wave energy and currents, which can help scientists and engineers determine where to install islands and restored habitats, as well as how to fix the jetty and where to dredge a deeper channel for the many boating operations.

“We want to have the best engineering and scientific data to make the best decision,” said Carter. “At the end of the contracting and design process we want to be very close to having something that would be useful to the (U.S. Army) Corps of Engineers.”

Carter said the money for the contract and design part of the process was redirected from last year’s budget. Money for the actual construction work is still not available, but the team wants to be ready when it does become available.

As far as the horseshoe crabs go, Carter said a Delaware Bay-wide strategy is needed to protect the species. While the fisheries commission decided not to impose a moratorium, he said his team will continue to do everything it can to protect the species at the Mispillion River.

“The Mispillion is very unique,” said Carter. “We will continue to do things here to protect the horseshoe crabs.”

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