

Crabbing ban for the birds

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Banning the harvest of horseshoe crabs will affect about 35 local jobs and cost local fishermen at least \$400,000 over two years, according to state figures.

The state Department of Environmental Protection plans to protect all Delaware Bay horseshoe crabs from fishing in 2006 and 2007 in the hope that their numbers will rebound. The state says a decline in crab eggs is behind a recent population crash of red knots.

These shorebirds stop along the bay to gorge on crab eggs a few weeks each year during their migration from the southern tip of South America to their arctic nesting grounds.

Red knots once were considered one of New Jersey's most abundant shorebirds. Now state biologists fear they will go extinct in as few as five years. Their numbers have plummeted recently from 95,000 in 1989 to as few as 13,000 last year.

While the red knot is the focus of the proposed ban, the state noted that other shorebirds that rely on crab eggs have declined as well, including ruddy turnstones, sanderlings and semi-palmated sandpipers.

The state Division of Fish and Wildlife, which has tracked these birds to the ends of the Earth, hopes that by protecting the crabs, the birds will have more food.

But the ban could affect everything from conch and eel trappers to the thousands of weekend warriors who converge on the Delaware Bay each year in search of lunker striped bass.

In a 16-page proposal this week, the DEP estimated that outlawing the harvest of horseshoe crabs will affect about 35 crabbers. Crabbers harvested 367,553 pounds of the crabs valued at \$193,605 in 2003.

The proposal is unpopular with horseshoe crabbers who are concerned about losing their livelihoods.

But the ban might affect other industries, including conch and eel trapping that rely on horseshoe crabs for bait. The state said gauging the financial impact is difficult because these watermen might simply switch baits.

Likewise, the crabs that are not harvested might feed more heavily on surf clams. New Jersey's surf clams had a dockside value of \$27.4 million in 2003. But given the large number of surf clams and the small number of additional horseshoe crabs, the impact is expected to be negligible, the state said.

The state expects striped-bass fishermen to see a bigger impact. Horseshoe crabs are prime bait for eels, which in turn are prized bait for striped bass. Striped bass fishing was a \$234 million industry in New Jersey in 2003.

A scarcity of eels could take its toll on the local economy, the state said.

Former West Cape May Mayor Bob Jackson disputes that. He is an avid surf fisherman who runs his own tackle shop.

"I never used hardly any eels last year," Jackson said. "Most bass fisherman around here use bunker or clam. And I did above average last year."

Meanwhile, the state's proposal played up the impact birding has on southern New Jersey's businesses. The report noted that saving red knots and other shorebirds keeps birdwatchers coming to Cape May

County. Birding generates between \$25 million and \$41 million per year in New Jersey.

It generates a lot of revenue," Jackson said. "They stay in our hotels, eat in our restaurants, buy our film and gas. They're at Wawa getting eight or nine cups of coffee at a time."

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, said the state has a responsibility to intervene and provide financial assistance to out-of-work fishermen.

"Coming up with the money is not going to be the hard part. The hard part is getting baymen interested in coming up with an alternate job," he said.

Red knots are among the most studied of all birds, Tittel said. State biologists have tracked them from their Canadian nesting grounds to Tierra del Fuego, Chile, where they spend the winter. Tittel said he agrees with state research that concluded there were not enough crab eggs to support red knots and other shorebirds.

"There are volumes of scientific evidence," he said. "They're the canary in the coal mine. If we lose the crabs and the red knots, we're losing an entire ecosystem in the Delaware Bay."