

House panel tables measure to halt horseshoe-crab catch

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Horseshoe crab eggs provide vital food for migrating red knots each spring.

A House panel yesterday unanimously defeated a bill aimed at saving an imperiled shorebird called the red knot.

The proposal, by Del. H. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem, the majority leader, would have banned the catching of horseshoe crabs and the importing of crabs to Virginia.

The crabs' eggs provide vital food for the birds each spring as they rest in the Delaware Bay region while making one of nature's most amazing trips -- a 9,000-mile flight from the tip of South America to the high Arctic.

Virginia Tech experts told the subcommittee on the Chesapeake Bay that the migrating birds' numbers have declined about 90 percent over the past 20 years, while the crabs have declined in the mid-Atlantic nearly two-thirds over the past 15 years.

Griffith, a bird watcher, contended that the overfishing of horseshoe crabs they are used as bait for catching conchs - leaves the birds insufficient food for migrating and reproducing.

"If there were plenty of crabs, you would not see that decline in the bird population," Griffith said.

Rick Robins, a spokesman for the conch industry, said the bill would kill the industry in Virginia and put 180 people out of work.

"Those jobs are critically important" to the economically struggling Eastern Shore, he said.

Robins said horseshoe crab fishing is sufficiently regulated, and he disputed that the crabs were in trouble.

The prospect of job losses resonated with Del. Daniel W. Marshall III, R-Danville. "I think we should put people before birds."

The panel tabled the bill, which means it is probably dead for the session.

The red knot is a type of sandpiper about 10 inches tall, with a gray back and a robin-red breast.

Bird-watchers flock to the Delaware Bay in the spring to watch the spectacle of the birds gathering to eat the crabs' eggs.

The panel heard conflicting testimony as to how much protecting horseshoe crabs in Virginia would help birds along the Delaware Bay, which lies between Delaware and New Jersey.

Griffith's bill called for a moratorium on horseshoe crab catches and imports until the birds' and the crabs' numbers increased significantly.

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