

Waterman feels crabby : Officials dispute his claim that state hurting fisheries

By Cathianne Werner-Porterfield, Milford Chronicle

SLAUGHTER BEACH - One Slaughter Beach waterman is seeing red, and it isn't on the puffed-up breast of a shorebird.

Not everybody is thrilled that Delaware's Department of Natural Resources partnered with The Nature Conservancy to protect a mile of beach at Mispillion Harbor. Nor is everyone pleased that DNREC has also partnered with the DuPont Co. to open the Mispillion Interpretive Center - a place where visitors can go to learn more about shorebirds and horseshoe crabs.

Charlie Auman, who has worked as a waterman at Mispillion Harbor for 26 of his 42 years, calls the recent DNREC initiatives, "just another nail in a fisherman's coffin."

Mr. Auman said the state has continued to restrict horseshoe crab harvesting since 1995, leaving fewer and fewer miles of beach for watermen like him to harvest the crabs to be used as bait.

"We gave up some (shoreline) voluntarily," he said. "Some went by restriction. The state now protects 90 percent of the shoreline. If one bird shows up they are willing to shut down beaches."

At present, he said, about one mile of beach at Port Mahon is open for harvesting.

Stew Michels, a fishery scientist with DNREC's division of fish and wildlife, said he's not sure if that stretch is a mile long, but admits, "It is small."

"Watermen would go to that stretch at Port Mahon," he said. "It is small and it's only open on Tuesdays and Thursdays after June 7."

Ten years ago, fishermen were allowed to share in the harvest of 500,000 horseshoe crabs, Mr. Auman said. Today, they are allowed 150,000.

"Next year it goes to 100,000," he said.

Craig Shirey, fisheries program manager for DNREC, said harvesting restrictions are suggested by the Atlantic States Marine Fishery Commission, a group consisting of voting members from each state bordering the Atlantic Ocean.

"They work to provide a management framework," Mr. Shirey said. "Whether or not the state wants to be more restrictive is always that state's option."

He said Delaware could lean toward adopting the suggested restriction of 100,000, male-only, harvesting guidelines. New Jersey, he said, took a more conservative stance and has issued a moratorium on harvesting.

"So far," Mr. Shirey said, "whether or not we want to go with something more restrictive, I don't think it's been decided. We have to make these regulation changes part of our approved regulations, whether or not we decide to change it, we have to move forward as if we are going to. That's not to say what the final

regulation will be."

The final decision, Mr. Shirey said, rests with department Secretary John Hughes.

And while a stroll down a Delaware Bay beach this time of year may reveal an abundance of horseshoe crabs, looks can be deceiving, especially when it comes to crab eggs as bird food, said Pat Emory, director of Fish and Wildlife.

"It takes about 10 years for the horseshoe crab to hit maturity and to lay eggs," Mr. Emory said. "The thing is that when you find out, the fishery is on the downslope. It takes that long to play out."

Any restriction is not just to keep the birds fed, but to also protect horseshoe crabs as a resource and in the long run, fishing.

If the 100,000, male-only restriction is put in place, it will be reviewed in two years to determine if it's still necessary, he said.

Mr. Auman said he isn't just an angry waterman who refuses to see both sides.

"I sit on (Gov.) Ruth Ann Minner's Shellfish Advisory Council," he said. "I've been there for six years."

He said he understands the red knot's plight but counters that watermen have a plight of their own.

"I'm just a man struggling to make a living," he said. "They say the red knots have decreased over the last 10 years. There have been no studies on the decline of the fishermen. We're either neck-and-neck with the red knot, or worse. No one in this administration is worried about the fishermen."

"That is not the case," Mr. Emory said. "We want to create a harmony where we can protect nature and the industry. It's a balance, and it's tough."

Mr. Auman said that without bait, his fishery is "not going to make it."

Mr. Emory said DNREC is "doing everything we can" to preserve the fishing industry and has been working with the University of Delaware to research alternative baits.

"When that happens we'll be in good shape," he said. "That way we won't have to rely on Mother Nature. We have put a lot of time, effort and money in that direction to come up with this artificial bait. Hopefully in the next couple years we'll have this up and running."

And with Delaware's rich fishing history, Mr. Auman said some concern about the conservation of fisherman should be evident.

Mr. Emory said Mr. Aumon is in a unique position to augment his income now that the Slaughter Beach shoreline has been preserved for the red knot and the new interpretive center will open in the spring. He said he has discussed options with him before.

"In Charlie's situation there is the possibility of ecotourism at the site," Mr. Emory said. "Charlie could get involved in ecotourism. He could charge to do boat tours, take people for a ride up the Mispillion and give people an eco-tour. There are different ideas that could help us and help him."

Mr. Auman just wants to keep fishing. He also wants future fisherman to know that the industry is a viable career option.

"Fishing and farming settled this state," he said. "Now, because of interests, they want to completely shut it down."

Mr. Emory said Mr. Auman is certainly correct about the importance of fishing and farming in the First State, but as to shutting down the fishing industry, "I want to try and we are going to do every thing we can to keep commercial fishery alive in Delaware."

News editor Cathianne Werner-Porterfield can be reached at 422-1200 or cporterfield@newszap.com.