

FEATURE STORY

Local Heroes

Lucky Horseshoe

The decidedly uncuddly horseshoe crab doesn't seem like the sort of creature that would arouse anyone's passions, but 53-year-old Glenn Gauvry admits that he's smitten. "I absolutely fell in love with this crab, an animal that had no other human advocate," he says.



Gauvry once owned a Philadelphia custom furniture company that catered to large corporations. But after 10 years in the business, he was struggling to reconcile his lifelong love of nature with a job that demanded very unnatural acts: Acres of West African rainforest can be torn down to harvest a single rare bubinga tree, whose red-brown wood might be carved into a \$100,000 executive-suite conference table.

As he was mulling over this dilemma one night, he saw a news story about a conservation group that traveled the world rescuing animals from oil spills. Gauvry joined the organization -- as a volunteer, at first -- cleaning oil from loons, puffins, snakes, beavers, and other animals. It was on oil-slicked beaches that he really started to notice the horseshoe crab. "The industrial designer side of me was just fascinated by them," he says. "It's like a miniature biosphere. All of its support systems are totally self-contained and protected within the outer perimeters of its shell."

Gauvry closed down his business for good in 1991 and several years later founded the Ecological Research and Development Group, the only nonprofit dedicated to preserving the four remaining species of horseshoe crab. But he didn't abandon his design work entirely. The horseshoe crab population has plummeted since the 1970s, and in Delaware the biggest threat to the animal is conchers -- watermen who hunt for conch and in the process kill some 3.5 million horseshoe crabs annually for bait. Gauvry's solution: With the help of fishermen, he designed and constructed a simple mesh bag that holds the bait in the conchers' traps and prevents other species from running off with it. His bait bags cut the amount of bait needed by 50 percent, and today the state of Virginia has made them mandatory in its conch fishery.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the crab's anatomy, however, has also contributed to its decline. Every spring, 10 percent of the breeding population dies when rough surf lands them shell-side-down in the sand. Since the crab frequently cannot right itself, Gauvry kicked off a "Just Flip 'Em" campaign to get beachgoers to simply turn the crabs over.

"It's easy to sell the public on saving the dolphin," says Gauvry. Odd-looking, uncharismatic animals are more difficult. "But there are interesting things about every organism on the planet," he says, "and if you have a driving passion for something and can package it in the right way, then people will get behind you. The formula really isn't so complex."

-- Jennifer Ouellette



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Photo: David Alan Harvey

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