

June 15, 2008

MARINE LIFE

Restrictions Reduce Horseshoe Crab Fishing

By TIM WACKER

WESTHAMPTON DUNES

CONSERVATION and commerce recently collided on a moonlit beach off Dune Road here when scientists counting horseshoe crabs mating in the sandy shallows bumped into a fisherman rapidly throwing the same crabs into his boat.

Terse greetings were exchanged as opposing forces in a growing dispute headed in the directions they came from.

Horseshoe crab fishermen are seething this spring after the state cut their daily catch quota to 200 crabs from 500, the first such cut in several years. Meanwhile, the scientists recommending those restrictions are pondering new measures as they try to manage the crabs more effectively.

Horseshoe crabs look like well-armored hubcaps with knitting needles for tails. They are scary looking but harmless, inedible yet prized bait for two equally unusual but edible marine creatures: snails and eels.

Past reductions on horseshoe crab harvests in Maryland and Delaware and a harvest ban in [New Jersey](#) sparked a gold rush in New York's less restricted waters last year. As prices jumped from 25 cents a crab to more than \$1, the 2007 harvest in New York nearly doubled its 150,000-crab annual quota, prompting the clampdown on the daily catch this year.

"Horseshoe crabs do play an important role here commercially," said Matthew Sclafani, a [Cornell University](#) Cooperative Extension researcher, who was leading the team of scientists that night on the shoreline. "Horseshoe crabs are also a very important species for shorebirds and fish that eat the crab's eggs. We're trying to find a balance between the two."

Fishermen say that balance is leaning too far in favor of the birds and fish. Past harvest restrictions throughout the Northeast were prompted in large part over concern for red knots, small shorebirds that glean horseshoe crab eggs, mostly from Delaware Bay beaches, to help fuel a 9,300-mile migration from South America to their Arctic Circle nesting grounds.

As Delaware Bay horseshoe crabs' numbers have dropped in recent years, so has the population of red knots, prompting an outcry from environmental groups and causing some of the state restrictions. These days shorebirds face numerous environmental challenges, said Peter Wenczel, a Southold bayman who is a member of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's horseshoe crab advisory board. One study found red knots died in South America from eating mussels tainted from red tide algae toxins, he said.

"It's no doubt the world population of wading birds is down, but it's not just because of horseshoe crab eggs," he said.

Fishermen harvesting bait for exotic seafood may not marshal public sentiment quite like protectors of shorebirds and prehistoric-looking crabs. But baymen are also becoming endangered, said Edward J. Warner Jr., a Southampton Town trustee and a seventh-generation bayman who fishes for horseshoe crabs and conch in Shinnecock Bay. New York State issued 360 crab harvest permits in 2007.

"These days all the fisheries have quotas on them; I just want to keep the local fishermen going," he said. "Last year you could get \$500 in crabs, so it was economically viable to pick them up. They should just let the fishermen catch the crabs and then, when they reach the annual limit, shut the fishery down."

But that practice led to the near 90 percent overharvest last year, said Kim McKown, a crustaceans expert with the New York Department of Environmental Conservation. Horseshoe crab research here lags far behind other states, she said, and until New York scientists know more about the health of New York populations they will be cautious.

Along with the current quota reductions, the state has been closing known horseshoe crab nesting beaches to fishing, and it is now developing research in the South Shore bays between the Shinnecock and Moriches Inlets.

"If there are areas of significant horseshoe crab and shore bird interactions," Ms. McKown said, "then these are areas where it would be important to restrict the crab harvest in the future."