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Horseshoe Crabs In Political Pinch Over Bird's Future

Creature Is Favored Bait On Shores of Delaware; Red Knot Loses in Court

By BARRY NEWMAN
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SLAUGHTER BEACH, Del. -- On the high tides of spring, horseshoe crabs crawl out of the water to go about the business of making more horseshoe crabs. The crab has been at this for three or four hundred million years, a record of tenacity that accounts for its pet name: the cockroach of the sea.

From the crab perspective, the best beaches on earth ring Delaware Bay, where a bird called the red knot also takes a spring break during its world-record migration, a 9,300-mile tour to the arctic from the southern tip of South America. The crabs lay trillions of pebbly, fat-filled eggs. The birds peck a few billion out of the sand, then go on their way.

That arrangement went well until the 1990s, when the watermen who fish on the bay started using horseshoe crabs as bait in traps. They caught so many that the red knots couldn't get their egg ration, and the whole shorebird subspecies suddenly began to die off.



For millions of years, horseshoe crabs have made Delaware Bay their home and breeding ground, laying trillions of eggs in its sands.

That led bird lovers to campaign for a moratorium on horseshoe-crab catching across Delaware Bay. New Jersey imposed one last year. This year, Delaware did, too. The watermen, fearful of dying off themselves, challenged Delaware's moratorium in state court, pleading for permission to harvest a few crabs for a few months of the year on Delaware's side of the bay. On Friday, just as the last red knots of the season were taking off for points north, the watermen won.

The bird lovers, who promise to keep fighting, were shocked. They had put together a powerful coalition of ornithologists, birdwatchers and tourism promoters to rally for the ban. In the crab catchers' corner, meanwhile, expertise consisted largely of Carl N. Shuster Jr., America's pre-eminent authority on horseshoe crabs.

"This animal is feisty, he's fighting me," Dr. Shuster was saying one bright afternoon at high tide on Slaughter Beach. He had just lifted a crab the size of a salad bowl off the sand. Around him, hundreds more were busy doing what crabs do -- laying eggs and fertilizing them on the beach. He twirled the crab. "Somebody bashed his brain in," said Dr. Shuster, "but it's still kicking like the dickens. By the way, his mouth is

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right here," he added, shoving a finger into its hidden maw.

Dr. Shuster is 87 years old. He wore a sun hat with a silver horseshoe crab pin on it, and a string tie with a wooden horseshoe crab for a slide. On his advice, as the crab-egg famine deepened in 2001, the National Marine Fisheries Service created a no-crab-catch zone in the Atlantic off Delaware and New Jersey. Its official name: the Dr. Carl N. Shuster Jr. Horseshoe Crab Sanctuary.



Red Knot

The crab moratorium, in Dr. Shuster's opinion, would make it hard for the watermen to put food on the table, but wouldn't do much more than what's being done already to feed the bird.

Thanks to his sanctuary, plus a series of harvest limits, the catch has already been reined in enough, he believes. Delaware Bay's horseshoe-crab population, he says, is returning to its highs of the 1980s. Back then, crabs were three-deep on the beaches in May and June, laying plenty of eggs to fuel the longest migratory flight.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service cited those measures in 2006, when it rejected an emergency petition by seven environmental groups to have the red knot declared an endangered species. Yet bird lovers are facing a maddening fact of crab life beyond anyone's control: Baby crabs take 10 years to grow up and make eggs. "If you're watching birds die," Dr. Shuster concedes, "to wait 10 years is certainly bothersome."



Horseshoe crab

The bird scientists who flock to Delaware Bay agree with Dr. Shuster about that, if nothing else. Only a moratorium, they argue, can guarantee the fastest possible renaissance of the crab.

"Carl has good ideas about crabs, but on crabs and birds we're in opposite camps," said Larry Niles, who leads a team of volunteer red-knot researchers. He was working late at a beach house across the bay in New Jersey after a day out counting birds.

Dr. Niles, 55, is the state's former endangered-species chief. He consults for New Jersey's Conserve Wildlife Foundation, a group devoted to "unbiased data for complicated situations." On the numbers, Dr. Niles and Dr. Shuster have innumerable differences.

Though both agree that fewer red knots have landed here recently -- down to 13,000 last year from 90,000 in 1989 -- they disagree about the number of birds on the bay historically and the number of crabs in it. Most of all, they disagree over the number of eggs in the sand. Dr. Shuster maintains there are more and more; Dr. Niles insists there still aren't nearly enough.

"All we care about," says Dr. Niles, "is the number of crabs coming ashore and the number of eggs they lay."

Some numbers in this dispute have dollar signs in front of them. The red knot's rest stop has become "New Jersey's Serengeti," as the Audubon Society puts it, a wildlife-tourism destination that draws thousands of bird watchers to the bed-and-breakfasts of Cape May. "Why destroy this source of income?" Dr. Niles asks. "Why wreck a major shorebird stopover for the sake of a minor fishery?"

Minor, yes, but it's the only fishery Frank Eicherly's got. On a gnatty evening, he was under sail in his ancient skipjack dredger, moving out of the bay and up Delaware's Murderkill River to the dock at Bowers Beach. On the deck lay a few sacks of whelk. His three-man crew struck sail, tied up, and hefted them onto a pickup.

Weathered and wild-bearded at 48, Mr. Eicherly is a rare waterman open to talking with outsiders about this dispute. He has been hauling in whelk for 15 years. Often (mistakenly) called conch, it mostly winds up stir-fried in Asia. Aside from a short dredging season, Mr. Eicherly knows only one way to catch a whelk: with a horseshoe crab in a trap at the bottom of the bay.

"I didn't think they were going to pull that moratorium on us," he said in his wheelhouse. "They got us in a tight spot if we can't get bait. Birdwatchers! Go tell them to watch us watermen. We're a colorful lot, and we're an endangered species, too."

One answer to the bait problem has occurred to Mr. Eicherly: Drain some blood from a live crab, inject the blood into the bladder of a fish, use that as bait, and let



the crab go free.

Dr. Shuster believes he has a better idea. He wants to let the watermen on Delaware Bay -- about 60 of them -- handpick 100,000 crabs, on one condition: that they don't touch the females. Having watched what crabs get up to on the beaches since 1947, Dr. Shuster knows their preferences. One male latches onto a female while she lays her eggs; four or five extra males just hang around.

"The birds don't lose anything," he says. "They don't eat the males. All they need are the eggs."

Backed by a Virginia whelk packer, the watermen sued the state of Delaware, asking that its moratorium be overturned, and for permission to collect male crabs. Six ecology groups slammed the male-only harvest as "unscientific," but Friday's Delaware court ruling said the moratorium didn't have "a rational basis" and the state was getting ready to issue watermen their crabbing permits.

On Slaughter Beach, the crabs had completed their afternoon duties. Dr. Shuster stood watching as they crept back into the bay.

"The bird people," he said, "lost a golden opportunity to be magnanimous. The male harvest can tide the watermen over." He righted a crab that had flipped on its back and was writhing in the sun. "Fascinating creatures," said Dr. Shuster. "But I do like the birds, you know. From an aesthetic viewpoint, they're prettier."

Corrections & Amplifications

The horseshoe crab is an arthropod. An earlier version of the headline on this article incorrectly said the animal is a crustacean. The above headline has been corrected.