

Sea story

Kids pen bilingual book about the plight of the horseshoe crab

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On a spring afternoon at Stamford's Cove Island Park, a group of fourth-graders from K.T. Murphy Elementary School searched the sand for horseshoe crabs. The group tagged one of the spidery beach creatures - part of an effort to track and count them - and released it into the ocean. The task was important, the group learned, as the horseshoe crab - a small, yet ecologically important animal - is being threatened by human activity.

"Crabs won't have long if people don't care," says Rene Gaspar, a fifth-grader at K.T. Murphy and member of last year's Cove Rangers, an after-school program at Soundwaters.

To encourage crab conservation, Gaspar and his fellow Cove Rangers decided to write a book - one that would tell the story of the horseshoe crab's life cycle in a way that the diverse population of their school and community could understand.

"Hernan's Long Journey: A Horseshoe Crab Story," follows Hernan, an English- and Spanish-speaking horseshoe crab, on the journey from his birthplace at Cove Island Park to the Long Island Sound and his return to the park with his girlfriend, Henrietta, who lays her eggs in the sand.

"We thought the best way to get the word out was to write a book in two languages, so twice as many people could benefit from the message," says Dione Clinkenbeard, the program's director.

That message is the myriad ecological functions served by horseshoe crabs, an arthropod whose 350 million-year-old existence is imperiled by pollution and over-baiting, among other threats.

"Their blood helps clean medicine so it's not contaminated," says Cove Ranger Mary Dzibela, referring to a page where Hernan's "special blue blood" is taken by a diver to "help save people's lives."

"They also help birds because (the birds) eat their eggs," says Darien Fuentes, a Cove Ranger who now considers herself a horseshoe crab expert. "They also eat dead things on the ocean floor."

After deciding to write a book, the students put their knowledge of horseshoe crabs to work, developing a narrative and drawing up illustrations. Spanish-speaking students took the lead in translating the story while non-Spanish speakers translated words using their English-Spanish dictionaries.

"We all worked together as a team," says Matteo Castro, a Spanish-speaking Cove Ranger. "People who speak Spanish helped people who couldn't."

Work on the book took place during the last 12 weeks of the 2006-07 school year and was finished in May. Educators in Stamford were impressed, honoring the students at a March Board of Education meeting attended by Mayor Dannel Malloy.

"They chose the words, they did it on their own," says Anthony Ramos, a teacher at Turn of River Middle School who helped translate the text. "It was a tremendous effort on their part."

The students also performed a short play based on the book for their school, starring Cove Ranger Giovanni Onel as Hernan. Employees from General Electric taught the students public speaking techniques in preparation for the play and donated funds for the book's printing.

"It was a lot of hard work, but definitely something we would consider doing in the future because of the positive impact it's had," says Clinkenbeard, who has given the book to Stamford educators and teacher friends outside the city.

"Hernan" is a unique accomplishment, the kids say, as it is one of the few - if not the only - bilingual children's books about horseshoe crabs. The students have since distributed copies of the book to Stamford Public Schools and hope to give it out to schools and libraries outside Stamford. In this way, they hope the book and its message will reach as many people as possible.

"We want to make this a treasure for other kids," says Dzibela.

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For information on the Cove Rangers program, held after school, call SoundWaters at 323-1978 or visit www.soundwaters.org.