

Backyard Stewardship™

Coastal Communities Define Their Shared Habitat as a Horseshoe Crab Sanctuary

By Glenn Gawry, President, Ecological Research & Development Group

The future survival of the world's four horseshoe crab species will ultimately depend on the preservation of spawning habitat; a challenging prospect in light of the ever-increasing human density along the same beaches horseshoe crabs rely on for propagation (breeding). With few exceptions, they do not spawn within protected habitats. They come ashore where humans live, play, and work. Sometimes they are accepted; often they are exploited or even reviled.

The Delaware Bay encompasses the world's largest horseshoe crab spawning habitat. However, the vast majority of this habitat runs along the shorelines of coastal communities. If we are to be successful in protecting the horseshoe crab species, it is essential to inform and engage these bayshore communities as conservation partners, because they are the ultimate stewards of the habitat these animals depend on for survival.

From its inception in 1995, the Ecological Research & Development Group (ERDG), a nonprofit organization whose primary mission is the conservation of the world's four horseshoe crab species, has recognized the importance of building an engaged community to achieve wildlife conservation. Backyard Stewardship, the ERDG's community-based sanctuary program started in 1999, was designed to encourage coastal communities around the world to declare their shared habitat a horseshoe crab sanctuary and promote



There is no need to guess where loyalties lie upon arriving in Slaughter Beach, Delaware. This Delaware Bayshore community has dedicated itself to the conservation of horseshoe crabs since declaring itself a sanctuary nearly one decade ago.



Horseshoe crabs spawn without interference inside a sanctuary established by the community of Prime Hook Beach, Delaware, thanks to assistance given by the ERDG and its Backyard Stewardship Program.

awareness of the species to visitors and neighboring communities.

Whether or not there is a moratorium on the harvesting of horseshoe crabs or regulations restricting beach access, it has little to do with what lies at the core of conservation, i.e., compassion for other living beings. Thus, the purpose of the sanctuary is to change the relationship communities have with their natural resources, which will far outlive the regulatory process.

This is not a state or federal program, nor is there any form of binding resolution between participating communities and the ERDG. It is simply a declaration of the community's desire to watch over this remarkable animal and their shared habitat. The interpretive signs that are posted on each of the sanctuary beaches serve to inform residents and visitors alike about the life cycle of the horseshoe crab and the community's desire to protect them.

In 2000, Broadkill Beach, a small Delaware Bay community in Sussex County, became Delaware's first community horseshoe crab sanctuary. Since then, the ERDG has established five additional Delaware Bay sanctuaries in the communities of Prime Hook Beach, Fowler Beach, and Slaughter Beach in Sussex



Credit: Ecological Research & Development Group

An interpretive sign welcomes visitors to the bayshore of Slaughter Beach, Delaware, where the community has established a horseshoe crab sanctuary thanks to the assistance of the Ecological Resource & Development Group.

mariner, its survival represents a story of remarkable evolutionary success that, unlike ourselves, has managed to harmonize with the environment it depends on for survival for over 445 million years. And, by its survival, it contributes significantly to the balance of nature. However, we must be mindful, for when we

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—MARGARET MEAD

County, as well as Kitts Hummock and Pickering Beach in Kent County, protecting over 14 miles of the world's most productive horseshoe crab spawning habitat. This spring, Camp Arrowhead, located on Indian River Bay, near Millsboro in Sussex County, will become Delaware's seventh sanctuary. The small Delaware Bay community of Fortiscue, the self-proclaimed “Weakfish Capital of the World” in Cumberland County, will become New Jersey's first.

For those communities who have come to admire this ancient

devalue a life to nothing more than a food resource for another species, or a commodity, it becomes much more difficult to engage a broader global community around its conservation.

Ultimately, the ERDG plans to expand this program to coastal communities throughout the world, wherever horseshoe crabs spawn. For more information about the ERDG and to watch a video about its Backyard Stewardship™ Program, please visit www.HorseshoeCrab.org. ■