



Protection for horseshoe crabs scaled back

Written by John Kovach Thursday, 17 September 2009 09:18

Amid dueling science and clashing factions in a local environmental organization, the Town Council voted Monday to wash back greater protection for horseshoe crabs.

In July, at the behest of Protect Your Environment President Marcia Stewart, the council strengthened the existing ordinance protecting horseshoe crabs to ban any human contact with the creatures.

Monday, by a 6-3 vote, the ordinance reverted to the prior language. Sponsor Michael Julian (R-1st), Gavin Forrester (R-3rd) and Thomas Moore (R-8th) dissented.

Stewart steadfastly contends that tagging kills the horseshoe crabs by preventing them from molting, and said other states have laws protecting the crabs. She has offered to allow Stratford to be used as a control site for any experiments.

But scientists involved in a research project in which some crabs are tagged to monitor their movements said the prohibition would curtail research necessary to protect the prehistoric arthropods, and that the tagging does no harm.

Members of the Town Council said they voted in July believing Stewart was advocating for greater protection on behalf of Protect Your Environment and the Conservation Commission, only to learn she was not.

"The undertone was that she had support from other groups," Joseph Kubic (R-9th) recently said. "That was the inference."

Amy Wanamaker (D-6th), the only council member to raise a hand when Stewart asked who had read the research she had disseminated, said she, too, was misinformed.

Wanamaker said she voted on behalf of greater protection when told a female horseshoe lost "six to eight eggs" when tagged, only to learn that "tens of thousands of eggs are laid at one time."

Monday, Denise Nelson, a member of Protect Your Environment, said Stewart was speaking without board approval.

"Marcia has no training in marine biology, no training in scientific method, no training in the scientific method for studying horseshoe crabs," Nelson said.

Stewart approached the Star during a recess and said that as president she was authorized to speak on any issue regarding protecting and preserving the environment.

Nelson said to the Town Council that Stewart was harming the reputations of both PYE and herself.

Conservation Administrator Brian Carey said Stewart was the only Conservation Commission member to vote in favor of a total ban on human contact.

That ban, more than one speaker said, made it illegal for a person to place a horseshoe crab that was in distress back in the water without fear of violating the law.

Carey said state regulations already protect the horseshoe crab, and that officers from the state Department of Environmental Protection have arrest powers to enforce those laws.

In the past, Carey said, the DEP would issue permits to allow commercial eel fisherman to harvest horseshoe crabs as bait. Those permits are not issued anymore.

Mark Beekey, assistant professor in the Department of Biology at Sacred Heart University, said tags have allowed scientists to learn that the horseshoe crabs range from one side of the Long Island Sound to the other, and far along the coastline. Crabs tagged in Greenwich have been found in Groton, he said.

In response to claims by Stewart that tagged crabs die because they have not been found, Beekey said it's a factor of the number of people looking for them. If more people knew who to contact when they see a tagged horseshoe crab, a rate that he said already was high would get higher.

While the average rate of return after tagging is "1%, 3% if you're lucky," Beekey said, Project Limulus at SHU has a 9% rate of return.

Project Limulus is a community-based study to gather data to potentially direct horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*) conservation programs and raise awareness of the connection between the Long Island Sound ecosystem and human health.