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Would horseshoe crabs draw interest?

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DOWNE TWP. - Could a horseshoe crab sanctuary be a draw for ecotourists in Downe Township?

Michael Oates suggested that possibility to the Downe Township Committee at its March meeting, but the committee and some residents had reservations. A vote of support was postponed for more resident input.

Oates said informational signs could be established at the Oyster Gut end of Fortescue and at Gandy's Beach, where sanctuaries could be established,

"The signs can be put up at no cost to the township," Oates said. "Birders come, look at the birds and leave. Maybe the horseshoe crab people will come and look and stay and eat."

Horseshoe crab eggs are essential to the spring bird migration. The crabs bury their eggs in the sand and then more crabs digging in to lay eggs expose those already there. The birds double their weight feeding at Delaware Bay before moving on to the arctic to nest and lay eggs. Some fly 7,000 miles during the migration.

Oates said the number of red knots, one of the birds who migrate, is dwindling, and they eventually will be listed as endangered.

He said the township owns a lot of beachfront that could be used and government would have nothing to do with management.

Some spoke against a sanctuary at Gandy's Beach because of a lack of places for people to park. There is parking along the public beach in Fortescue.

Karen Smith said she feared a sanctuary would be an invitation for people to come and trample the dunes, something they do already in spite of signs.

There are areas marked for beach access, but most people just climb over. They even put folding chairs on top of the dunes and picnic there. The constant traffic causes the sand to spill down onto the roadway and narrows the road, as well as making it slippery for traffic.

Committeewoman Lisa Garrison said many of the township's residents used to harvest horseshoe crabs to sell for bait and supplement their income.

There currently is a moratorium on the harvest in New Jersey.

Garrison wanted to know how this would affect local watermen if the moratorium is lifted. Oates said he did not believe it would ever be lifted on the beaches.

Oates said New Jersey has no horseshoe crab sanctuaries and the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary has money for such a project .

Resident Bernie Sayers said the idea bothered him considerably, because people not familiar with the crabs would pick them up by the tail to turn them over if they were stranded on their backs by the tide. The tails can be easily broken or dislodged.

Resident Liz Cowley wanted to know what would be expected of residents if a sanctuary was established.

Oates said nothing would be expected.

"The township would establish its own laws," he said.

Mayor Renee Blizzard said the topic will be discussed further at the April 6 meeting.

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