

Medically, we're really lucky to have horseshoe crabs around

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To flip, or not to flip: That is the Lowcountry question.

When you walk on the beach at this time of year, you're likely to see dozens, scores, even hundreds of horseshoe crabs, most of them lying helplessly on their crusty, prehistoric-looking backs.

Lots of people assume they're dead, but they're not. They're just upside down. Maybe they were knocked over by the surf before the tide went out, or maybe it's a result of the hanky-panky that drew them to these shores in the first place. But they have flipped over and they can't get up.

What do you do?

My instinct, being a feeble-minded but still upright Homo sapien, was to not get involved. Who am I to interfere with the ancient rituals of creatures from the deep? Who am I to make a life-and-death decision for wild things whose mysteries include, but are not limited to, the fact that they are neither horseshoe nor crab?

Surely, they wouldn't all be flipped on their backs if it weren't part of God's plan.

I went home and pondered these things, and Googled them.

I discovered that the female is the larger one and she comes ashore when the tide and the moon and the temperature are just right. And the smaller male, or maybe several of the rascals, cling to the female for a ride up the beach, where she lays tens of thousands of BB-sized eggs, which a 5-ounce bird called a red knot needs to refuel on its 9,300-mile round-trip from Tierra del Fuego in southern South America to its Arctic breeding grounds.

Then there's the blood. The horseshoe crab, which is kin to the scorpion, not the crab, has watery blue blood. Scientists transform it into a powder that can detect potentially dangerous toxins in new medicines. Which is to say that any of us who has ever taken a prescription drug owes a lot, perhaps our very lives, to the horseshoe crab.

Yet in the Delaware Bay region, the mother of all horseshoe crab breeding grounds, they've been killing them by the truckload to make bait for eels. And for hundreds of years, mankind used horseshoe crabs to make fertilizer.

Suddenly, I was heavy with worry over my role in this global science-fiction ballet. And all I was trying to do was walk the dog on the beach.

Relief came from Al Segars, a veterinarian with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources who is going about the Lowcountry educating blokes like me on the value of the horseshoe crab.

Segars also is conducting a baseline study on the local habits of the horseshoe crab. That includes tagging the creatures with the help of people like John Ferguson and Butch and Holley Miles, all certified master naturalists from Daufuskie Island.

Weather permitting, Segars and a group of Daufuskie volunteers are going to tag a bunch of horseshoe crabs tonight. He did it with another group on Harbor Island on Thursday night. They talk about the crabs, grab a bite to eat, then slide out onto the moonlit beach to gather horseshoe crabs and tag them. In coming years, if you find a horseshoe crab with a tag on it, simply follow the directions written there. The information will help people like Segars better manage and understand this important population.

Ferguson said he's been out on the Daufuskie beach on Calibogue Sound this month and seen thousands of horseshoe crabs.

Segars said many are harvested in South Carolina and taken to a laboratory in Charleston to be bled. The harvesting is licensed and controlled by DNR. The crabs are returned alive to waters of similar salinity, Segars said. Experts say 80 percent to 90 percent of them survive the ordeal. Harvesting horseshoe crabs for bait is prohibited in South Carolina.

Then I asked Segars the big question: to flip or not to flip an upside down horseshoe crab.

"Flip 'em over," he boomed.

"They can't sting, bite, cut or hurt you. Pick them up by the shell -- not the tail, that's their steering."

You might even want to carry the horseshoe crab down to the water, Segars said.

Don't ask and don't tell how they all got turned upside down. Just flip 'em.