

Students, volunteers help SoundWaters research horseshoe crabs

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STAMFORD -- Horseshoe crabs may not look like the friendliest of sea creatures, says SoundWaters Executive Director Leigh Shemitz, but they are harmless.

SoundWaters, a Stamford-based environmental education organization, is in its fifth year of tagging and researching the docile creatures, Shemitz said. Each year, students from Stamford Public Schools and public volunteers help the nonprofit engage in an important scientific study of the horseshoe crab's travel habits by tagging the creatures that come near the shore, she said.

"This tagging program is a great way to learn about these animals and research their spawning patterns," said Shemitz, who noted that SoundWaters began tagging horseshoe crabs in a number of Stamford shoreline locations a few weeks ago. "SoundWaters teaches the public and students about the Long Island Sound and the animals that live in it. Horseshoe crabs are a great way to get people involved with the Sound."

Since last July, more than 17,000 Stamford students, from preschool to high school, have learned about horseshoe crabs through the SoundWaters program, she said.

"When we first introduce students to these animals, we explain that they are harmless creatures," Shemitz said. "We then go on to teach them about their habitat, their spawning patterns, how to tag them and eventually, when the students reach high school, they help with researching these interesting animals."

Louis Maradiage, a 14-year-old eighth grade student at Dolan Middle School, said he tagged his first horseshoe crab this year.

"These animals are really cool," Maradiage said. "I like the fact that we can track them and learn about how they lay eggs and mate by tagging them -- it's interesting."

The SoundWaters program starts in every Stamford public school in January and continues through June, Shemitz said. The students learn a variety of different

facts about horseshoe crabs, depending on their grade level, and the program stresses how important the creatures are to the Long island Sound, she said.

"We really emphasize the food chain and how other animals are affected by horseshoe crabs," Shemitz said. "For example, the crabs lay their eggs at the same time shorebirds migrate north. The eggs are a main source of food for these birds, so if horseshoe crabs start to die off, so will the birds."

Sarah Cobino, a 13-year-old eighth grade student at Dolan Middle School, said by participating in the SoundWaters program, she has learned many facts about horseshoe crabs that she never would have known otherwise.

"Horseshoe crabs are really interesting," Cobino said. "The males have hands like boxing gloves and the females are much bigger than the males. I never knew that before."

Another important part of the horseshoe crab tagging program is the public engagement it initiates, Shemitz said. Many community organizations volunteer to help tag horseshoe crabs and clean up the beach, she said.

"Cleaning the beach and tagging go hand in hand," said Shemitz, who noted that more than 1,000 crabs will be tagged through the program this year. "We have some really great volunteers in the community that spend their time helping with this program. It grows every year, and It's really great to see kids and adults working together to help research this animal."

To learn more about SoundWaters and the horseshoe crab, visit www.soundwaters.org.