

BAYSHORE REGIONAL WATERSHED COUNCIL

DON'T OVERLOOK HORSESHOE CRABS IN RARITAN BAY

OLD OAK TRAIL

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(Below is an editorial calling for more research, especially a state-wide population study, by NJDEP to better manage Horseshoe Crabs.)

During May and June, thousands of Horseshoe Crabs come ashore along the sandy beaches of the Bayshore region of New Jersey to conduct their ancient mating ritual. Wait, you are probably thinking of Delaware Bay. Yet, I am actually referring to the northern Bayshore waters of Raritan Bay and Sandy Hook Bay. The southern shoreline of New Jersey is not the only place that has lots of Horseshoe Crab activity, although you wouldn't know it as a result of frequent newspaper and magazine articles in past years devoted to Horseshoe Crabs and Delaware Bay.



We are coming to the closing stages of another breeding season for the Horseshoe Crab (*Limulus polyphemus*) in New Jersey. Nevertheless, this year we still do not fully understand the population dynamics of the Horseshoe Crab statewide. This lack of knowledge is in spite of a statewide moratorium that bans the harvest of Horseshoe Crabs by fisherman for eel and whelk bait. There have also been strong advocacy efforts by the American Littoral Society, New Jersey Audubon, and other environmental groups to preserve Horseshoe Crab habitat for migrating shorebirds, particularly the rapidly declining Red Knot, which feed on fat-rich Horseshoe Crab eggs to gain weight in order to complete their migration to summer breeding grounds in the Arctic.

There has been a decline in Horseshoe Crab numbers since 1991 in Delaware Bay and a corresponding decline in shorebird numbers. Nevertheless, this has not brought about a coordinated effort by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) to develop a comprehensive population study on the statewide status of the Horseshoe Crab and the feeding locations of migrating shorebirds that consume the crab's eggs. Nor has NJDEP brought together groups who have an interest in protecting Horseshoe Crabs and migratory shorebirds other than those interested parties in Delaware Bay.

It is true that Delaware Bay is a critical stopover area for migrating species of birds and that there is a strong connection between the late May arrival of these birds and the spawning activities of Horseshoe Crabs. Yet, if we are truly interested in preserving the vital link between Horseshoe Crabs and migratory shorebirds then I believe we need scientific population studies of Horseshoe Crabs throughout New Jersey, including the New York-New Jersey Harbor Estuary and Barnegat Bay.

People, especially scientists and policy makers, should not make the mistake of ignoring Horseshoe Crabs and migrating shorebirds in other parts of coastal New Jersey. Members of the Bayshore Regional Watershed Council, an all-volunteer group dedicated to the restoration of Raritan and Sandy Hook bays, routinely observe Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Dunlins, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Sandpipers along bay beaches in May and June feeding on Horseshoe Crab eggs. Our shores are not silent and should not go unnoticed by state officials and policy makers.

Right now, accurate statewide scientific population data on Horseshoe Crabs does not exist, though there is plenty of anecdotal evidence. To accurately assess population trends, a baseline census must be taken and then repeated annually, using the same methods and counting locations. Unfortunately, no one can say now with any certainty how many Horseshoe Crabs or migratory shorebirds during May and June inhabit the entire length of the Jersey Shore, from Raritan Bay to Delaware Bay.

I urge NJDEP to increase its research and conservation efforts on Horseshoe Crabs to include the whole state. We need all the information and beach habitat we can get if we are to properly protect the connection between Horseshoe Crabs and migratory shorebirds. They are both important elements to the character, history, and environment of the entire Jersey Shore.
