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## Import Ban Sought on Asian Crabs

By *JON HURDLE*

In another twist in the long-running debate over how to manage the population of [horseshoe crabs](#) along the East Coast, fisheries officials are calling for a ban on imports of three Asian species of the ancient arthropods.

The [Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission](#), an interstate body that oversees marine resources along the coast, urged 14 member states to outlaw imports of the crabs because they carry parasites and pathogens that could harm local fisheries and endanger human health.

“The importation of Asian native horseshoe crabs poses a significant threat to the welfare and survival of the wildlife resources of the United States” — even if they are already dead when used as bait in United States waters, it said.

The Asian species have been imported since 2011 to meet the demand from commercial fishermen. Restrictions on the harvest of domestic horseshoe crabs along the East Coast have driven up the price of horseshoe crabs, which are used as bait for eels and whelks.

Thirteen states have already taken steps at the commission’s urging to limit the crab harvest in an attempt to protect the [red knot](#), an imperiled shorebird that relies on the eggs of horseshoe crabs in places like Cape May and Delaware Bay to refuel during its migration from southern Argentina to breeding grounds in Arctic Canada each spring.

The red knot population has plummeted because of overfishing of the horseshoe crabs, and the bird is a candidate for designation as an endangered species by the federal [Fish and Wildlife Service](#). Biologists say the red knot is at risk of extinction.

Only New Jersey has placed a complete moratorium on the harvesting of horseshoe crabs, although a bill has been introduced in the state assembly that would lift it in a bid to protect the livelihoods of local fishermen.

The commission said it was seeking the introduction of state bans because the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) can take up to a year to add species to a list of “injurious wildlife” that are subject to federal regulation.

If the domestic population of horseshoe crabs is damaged, the food supply of shorebirds could be further reduced at a time when the red knot is struggling to recover from years of overfishing of the crabs, the commission warned.

In 2012, seafood dealers in New York State imported 16,280 pounds of Asian horseshoe crabs in response to the domestic bait shortage, the commission said, noting that the imported species themselves are in decline in Asia.

Horseshoe crab bait sells for as much as five times what it cost a decade ago, said Stewart Michels, the fisheries program manager at the [Division of Fish and Wildlife](#) in Delaware, which is represented on the commission. He said a female crab could now fetch as much as \$5.

Delaware backs the proposed import ban and plans to implement one, Mr. Michels said. Currently Delaware fishermen are allowed to harvest about 162,000 horseshoe crabs a year, but only males and only after June 7, when red knots and other shorebirds have resumed their northward migration.