

# Community stewardship gives legs to crab program: Opinion

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Mikes Oates guides a beach tour while Aiden Piernikoski (front) examines a horseshoe crab for himself during the Horseshoe Crab Festival in Fortescue on Saturday, May 31, 2014. (Staff Photo by Jesse Bair/South Jersey Times)

By Michael Oates

*Special to the Times*

Twice in the past two weeks, the residents of Downe Township have proudly demonstrated their community's commitment to protecting the local ecosystem and the horseshoe crab/shorebird phenomenon that occurs annually each spring.

On May 31, the township held its first Horseshoe Crab Festival, which celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Fortescue Horseshoe Crab Sanctuary, the first and only such sanctuary in the state.



The sanctuary was established by the community in 2009 with the help of the Ecological Research & Development Group (ERDG), a non-profit dedicated to the conservation of horseshoe crabs. Since 2009, each morning during the crabs' spawning season, residents walk the public beaches of the Delaware Bay, flipping over stranded horseshoe crabs. Sixth and seventh-graders from the local school have even made a music video about this called "Just flip 'em." See it at <http://vimeo.com/user15002426/review/86838871/40d45e387e>

The festival was a real community event — a community photo and poster contest, plenty of music and local food, and even a wandering 6-foot horseshoe crab complete with eggs on top of a golf cart — that a local seamstress had sewn together.

But there were also exhibits and nature walks that took curious visitors out to the water's edge, where they could actually learn about and experience the crabs, and even handle them. In short, the festival was a nice balance of celebration, community and conservation.

Then, at their monthly meeting on June 9, the Downe Township Committee unanimously approved the creation of two more community-based horseshoe crab sanctuaries, one in Gandy's Beach and the other in Money Island. Now those village beaches will serve as protected crab habitats, with residents encouraged to "Just flip 'em" as well.

All this stands in sharp contrast to the state Department of Environmental Protection's current regulatory approach to the conservation of horseshoe crabs, which includes closing beaches, restricting beach access, and even ticketing those who choose to flip crabs promptly rather than wait for beach-access authorization. With such practices, I wonder to what degree the state is really interested in engaging the residents of any of the Bayshore communities in their broader shorebird/horseshoe crab conservation effort.

The state's "logic" also extends to its current beach replenishment strategy. If one reviews the data gathered in bay-wide spawning surveys conducted over the last 13 years, both Fortescue and Gandy's Beach are consistently among

the top three most productive horseshoe-crab spawning beaches in New Jersey. Both lost a tremendous amount of beach due to Superstorm Sandy, yet neither beach was replenished by the state this past year.

Instead, sand was pumped on Moore's Beach, a state wildlife area with primarily sod beaches, a less-than-ideal horseshoe crab spawning habitat. Certainly, it would make more sense to pump sand on beaches that are known to be highly productive and that could also serve to better protect local communities.

Until the state acknowledges that regulation is not the way to promote conservation in Bayshore residents, it will never realize its well-intentioned environmental goals.

I suggest the state would be better off reflecting on what the residents of Downe Township have recognized — that promoting community-based environmental stewardship is the most effective tool to protect our natural resources now and in the future.

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