

# Legislators propose bill to ban harvest of Stratford horseshoe crabs

By Bill Cummings



Photo: Brian A. Pounds / Hearst Connecticut Media

An adult female horseshoe crab in a tidal pool on Milford Point in Milford.

**STRATFORD** - A pair of state legislators want to ban fishermen from harvesting horseshoe crab along the town's shoreline to protect a species some believe is struggling in Long Island Sound.

"This is an adaptable species that has been around for 300 million for years," said state Rep. [Joe Gresko](#), D-Stratford. "They just need a little assistance."

Gresko, a co-sponsor of a bill before the [General Assembly](#) that would ban

crab harvesting only within Stratford's borders, said the legislation is backed by research from [Sacred Heart University](#)'s biology department that shows dangerously low breeding rates for the crab.

But [Robert Klee](#), commissioner of the state [Department of Energy and Environmental Protection](#), came out against the bill last week, telling the legislature's environment committee the state's crab population is "stable" and a Stratford ban is not needed.

"There is nothing unique about the shoreline of Stratford in terms of horseshoe crab abundance or breeding success that warrants a special designation," Klee said.

Gresko pointed out that horseshoe crabs provide food for birds, and said considerable money and effort resulted in a new bird sanctuary at Stratford Point. "What can it hurt?" he said of the proposed ban, which is also sponsored by state Rep. [Ben McGorty](#), R-Shelton.

Often referred to as "living fossils," horseshoe crabs are among the oldest species on Earth, dating back 445 million years. Although more than 48,000 of the spiked-tailed, U-shaped creatures are harvested annually in Connecticut for use as bait, researchers are also using their blood, extracted without harming the crab, to test vaccines.

## **Collapsing crab**

[Jennifer H. Mattei](#), a Sacred Heart University biology professor, said the population of *Limulus Polyphemus*, or horseshoe crab, is suffering in Long Island Sound, based on studies by the university.

"We have found that the adult spawning population on the beaches of Connecticut to be very low compared to numbers found in the Mid-Atlantic states," Mattei told the General Assembly's environment committee last week.

She noted that in Delaware Bay one spawning female is found per square

meter, on average, while the average density of spawning females on Milford Point Beach is “several orders of magnitude less.”

Mattei also said the Connecticut crab population is aging, a trend that reduces breeding and the number of baby crabs born each year. “A healthy growing population of horseshoe crabs should have at least 30 percent of new adult recruits but the Long Island Sound population had between 10 and 12 percent,” she said.

“Based on our data, we support an expansion of no harvest zones to allow female horseshoe crabs to lay more eggs,” Mattei said. “The Long Island Sound population is reproducing well below its maximum level and needs Short Beach [in Stratford] to allow for better survival and expansion of our local population.”

Klee painted a much different picture in testimony submitted to the environment committee.

“DEEP’s Long Island Sound Trawl Survey and extensive tagging studies show that the horseshoe crab population in the western Sound is stable,” Klee said. “This population overwinters in the mid-Sound area and spawns on all available spawning beaches over their mature life span [approximately 10 years].”

Klee pointed out the state has closed some areas to horseshoe crab harvesting, including in adjacent Milford. “These areas were identified based on scientific information gathered by DEEP staff in consultation with migratory bird experts,” Klee said.

### **“Perennial problem”**

Christina Senft-Batoh, Stratford’s conservation administrator, urged the environment committee and General Assembly to pass the harvest ban.

“This direct capture has been a perennial problem on Short Beach in

Stratford,” Senft-Batoh said. “Enacting and enforcing the proposed bill would bolster their population throughout the Sound.”

Senft-Batoh added “Protecting the species is of great importance from both an environmental and human-health standpoint. Horseshoe crab eggs are a primary source of fuel for migratory shorebirds, and horseshoe crab blood is used extensively in the pharmaceutical industry.”

Gresko said he understands DEEP’s opposition to the bill but pointed out Sacred Heart is doing far more research on crabs than the state.

“I’m going with the professor,” Gresko said. “There has been a lot of work in Stratford, such as planting native species to provide food for birds. They put in [concrete] reef balls to lessen erosion and replenish the beach. My point is why can’t [a harvest ban] work?”