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Delaware Announces Decision to Protect Horseshoe Crabs and Birds of Delaware Bay

November 21, 2006, the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control announced its decision to pass a 2 year moratorium on the bait harvest of horseshoe crabs in the Delaware Bay in order to protect Red Knot, a migrating shorebird, from extinction. This despite intense opposition to the moratorium from watermen and the eel and conch industry.

The Delaware Riverkeeper, Maya van Rossum applauded the decision -- "Secretary Hughes made a sound decision based on sound science, setting aside the politics of the issue and instead making the best decision for our ecology and our region. He is to be supported, applauded and respected for this important action."

Delaware Bay is home to the world's largest population of horseshoe crabs worldwide. As a result, each year the Delaware Bay is also host to the second largest population of migrating shorebirds in North America.

There is a multi-million dollar ecotourism industry that has evolved around the dramatic arrival and feasting of the migrating shorebirds.

Among the migrating shorebirds is the Red Knot rufa that each year migrates up to 30,000 kilometers from wintering grounds in South America to breeding grounds in the Arctic. On this journey the birds will fly as far as 4000 miles nonstop. Their migration includes just a few critically timed and selected rest stops – the Delaware Bay is one of the most important. When the Red Knot rufa arrive at the Delaware Bay they are literally starving – they have used up their body fat, some of their lean body mass, and even their organs are shrunken in size. They come to the bayshore to rest and feast on horseshoe crab eggs, historically available in great abundance. They must eat enough eggs to double their body weight in a matter of about three weeks so they can successfully embark on the final nonstop leg of their journey.

Independent studies show that the number of Red Knot rufa observed in the Delaware Bay stopover has steadily declined from over 100,000 in the 1980s to 43,000 in 2000 to just 15,300 in the year 2005. Studies also have found that from the mid-1980s to 2005, the number of Red Knot rufa observed in their main wintering areas in South America decreased from over 51,255 in 2000 to 17,653 in 2005. Experts have predicted the Red Knot rufa may go extinct by the year 2010 under current conditions. According to experts, the decline in the Red Knot rufa is directly related to the decline in horseshoe crabs and available eggs in Delaware Bay.

Horseshoe crabs are presently harvested and killed for use as bait for the conch and eel fishing industries.

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The Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control had proposed new rules governing horseshoe crab harvesting in Delaware waters: one option would enact a complete moratorium and provide the maximum available protection to horseshoe crabs and the red knot; another option, championed by seafood exporters, would allow the continued catching of horseshoe crabs, what was known as a male only take.

Environmental organizations throughout the region including the Delaware Riverkeeper Network, American Littoral Society, NJ Audubon and Delaware Audubon Society supported the moratorium option.

According to van Rossum, "Commercial fishermen and seafood exporters effectively organized against the needed moratorium option. They hired influential lobbyists and put pressure on the State to allow continued harvesting of horseshoe crabs."