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LEADING CONSERVATION GROUPS CALL ON DELAWARE BAY GOVERNORS TO SAVE THE IMPERILED RED KNOT

Groups ask Governors of New Jersey & Delaware for an Emergency Closure of Horseshoe Crab Fishery

TRENTON, NJ – Leading conservation groups joined forces to request an emergency closure of horseshoe crab fishing along the mid-Atlantic shore. In a letter to the Governors of Delaware and New Jersey the groups contend if the fishery opens as scheduled on June 8th, up to 300,000 crabs could be harvested, thereby significantly further depleting the main food source for thousands of imperiled red knots and jeopardizing their chances for survival.

“It’s without question that closing the horseshoe crab fishery will help stabilize the red knot population,” stated Eric Stiles, Vice President of Conservation, New Jersey Audubon. “So far, we have failed the bird and this step is the most important action we can take to halt its brisk decent toward extinction.”

Each year thousands of red knots make a heroic 10,000 mile journey from their winter home at the tip of South America to the arctic. The first stage of their migration includes a 3,000 to 4,000 mile flight, nonstop, to the Delaware Bay shores. Once here, the starving birds must feast on horseshoe crabs in order to restore the reserves necessary to complete their migration.

The red knot population visiting the Delaware Bay once numbered more than 150,000, however, biologists have conducted surveys and estimate the current population to be around 17,653. According to recent studies, in the last ten years, the red knot population has declined more than 90%. According to Tim Dillingham, Executive Director of the American Littoral Society, “If we do not take action to protect the crabs and the birds, according to the experts they will be extinct by the year 2010. Our States have the right and obligation to take immediate necessary action to avoid this catastrophic and irreversible outcome.”

“We know the red knot and 5 other species of shorebirds are dependent on horseshoe crab eggs to complete their spring migration to the arctic,” stated Caroline Kennedy, Director of Conservation Initiatives for Defenders of Wildlife. “Because the birds must double their weight by feeding on this fat-rich food in order to arrive in the arctic and successfully nest and raise young, it is imperative that we protect their food source. We know the problem, and we have a way to fix it.”

The red knot, a shorebird, depends almost exclusively on the horseshoe crab eggs to complete their migration. They require a super abundant supply of horseshoe crabs in order to obtain the quantity of eggs needed to fuel their journey. Scientific research documents a steady decline in the horseshoe crab population of Delaware Bay over the past 15 years. The crabs are caught by fishermen who use their eggs as bait for catching conch and eel. Delaware Riverkeeper Maya van Rossum states, “The decline in horseshoe crab egg availability, and therefore the decline in the red knot and other shorebird populations is undisputedly attributable to the over harvest of horseshoe crabs. We have failed to take the strong action needed in the past to stop this downward spiral. If we once again fail to take

strong action today we will lose the crabs, the eggs and the birds, and all who depend upon them – including a thriving ecotourism industry.”

The letter outlines four actions the organizations are urging the governors to take to halt the downward trend:

- Immediately institute a moratorium on the horseshoe crab harvest.
- Support regional efforts with surrounding states to enact a harvest moratorium and other measures to conserve this shared resource.
- Support efforts to federally list the Red Knot *rufa* subspecies under the Endangered Species Act.
- Continue bay-wide efforts to reduce human harassment of foraging shorebirds

“The red knot is facing extinction faster than any other shorebird species in the world,” stated Jeff Tittel, Sierra Club, New Jersey Chapter Director. “We will fail this species unless an emergency closure is issued. It’s simply a matter of addressing the situation head on and saving this bird from extinction.”

“At this point, to address the collapse of the Delaware Bay ecosystem all conservation measures must be implemented,” stated Nick DiPasquale, Conservation Chair, Delaware Audubon. “The immediate closure of the horseshoe crab fishery is the most pressing action needed but our groups will be seeking additional remedies as well.”

“The scientific evidence on the red knot decline confirms the significant overfishing of the horseshoe crab,” said Perry Plumart, Director of Conservation Advocacy for the American Bird Conservancy. “Even maintaining a stable horseshoe crab population is a death sentence for the birds that need a super abundance of horseshoe crab eggs to survive.”

The Delaware Bay is one of 4 major shorebird migration stopovers in the world. Just a decade ago, more than 1.5 million birds congregated on the Bay shores in a natural phenomenon known world-wide that attracts thousands of birdwatchers annually.

“The Red Knot is sliding toward permanent extinction,” said Greg Butcher, Director of Bird Conservation for the National Audubon Society. “We owe it to future generations to provide a safety net for the Red Knot, which in turn will help keep intact the full web of life on the Delaware Bay.”

In summing up the dire situation, the letter reads, “Quite simply, it is ecologically and economically reckless to allow the continued harvest of Delaware Bay population horseshoe crabs while the Red Knot population heads for extinction.”

In an effort to off-set any economic hardship this closure would cause the fishing community, the groups are supportive of state and federal appropriations that would lead to the promotion and development of alternative bait sources for their respective catches.

A copy of the letter can be found on-line at www.njaudubon.org.

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