

October 16, 2023

End-of-Year Report for 2023
NJ Scientific Collecting Permit # 2023-1916

Limulus polyphemus

Horseshoe Crab Monitoring & Tagging Activity in Raritan Bay & Sandy Hook Bay, Monmouth County, New Jersey, May & June 2023. Conducted by Volunteers with Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit.

Copy of report to:

Brookdale Community College, Environmental Science Department
M.A.S.T (Marine Academy of Science and Technology)
Monmouth University
National Park Service/Gateway National Recreation Area
NJDEP/Fish & Wildlife Division
New York-New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program
US Fish & Wildlife



A mating pair of adult horseshoe crabs in Sandy Hook Bay, NJ

Report prepared by:
Joseph Reynolds
President/Director
Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit
(732) 615-8694
jreynolds@savecoastalwildlife.org
www.savecoastalwildlife.org

The full HSC monitoring database is available for downloading from Save Coastal Wildlife website at: <https://www.savecoastalwildlife.org/horseshoe-crab-monitoring>

Summary

This is an end-of-year report for a study in 2023 to monitor Horseshoe Crab mating activities at five estuarine sites along Sandy Hook Bay & Raritan Bay in Monmouth County, New Jersey. The project began in 2009 and is ongoing. This report marks the fifteenth (15) year of the study.

A Raritan Bay – Sandy Hook Bay, Monmouth County, New Jersey Horseshoe Crab spawning survey was implemented by volunteers with Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit (formerly known as the Bayshore Watershed Council, an all-volunteer group), and with cooperation from high school students with the Marine Academy of Science and Technology (M.A.S.T.), located at Sandy Hook, Gateway National Recreation Area. Volunteers with the Monmouth County Park System & Bergen County Parks have also lent a hand for many years. More than 80 volunteers in total are involved every year to implement this survey. By collaborating with efforts from the public, the benefits of citizen-based conservation activities become clear: education and public involvement are key components to the most effective wildlife conservation programs.

OLD BUSINESS for 2023

- Volunteers under the leadership of Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit conducted monitoring and tagging activities at five (5) sites during periods of falling tides and full & new moon phases in May and June, the representative spawning season for horseshoe crabs in the State of New Jersey, and the Mid-Atlantic.

FINDINGS for 2023

- The total Horseshoe Crab population in the study area was 3,004 crabs. This number represents adult spawning horseshoe crabs during 4 surveys at five beaches. This was an overall decrease from the 2022 survey observations, but somewhat similar to the results found in 2021 (Table 2).
- Total female horseshoe crabs in 2023 was 680 and made up approximately 20 percent of the population. This percentage is similar to the previous year. Adult male crabs in 2023 was 2,297 and represents approximately 80 percent of the population. Around 60 percent of males are single.
- The hot spot for HSC mating activity in 2023 was Leonardo Beach in Middletown Township. The spawning population of horseshoe crabs at both Plum Island at Gateway Sandy Hook and Cliffwood Beach seems to be suffering from beach erosion issues.

Background

Horseshoe crabs are 'living fossils', the last survivors of a group of organisms that first appeared in the fossil record over 400 million years ago. Horseshoe crabs play a vital role ecologically along the shores of the Hudson-Raritan Estuary, as well as Sandy Hook Bay & Raritan Bay. Migratory shorebirds, including ruddy turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*), dunlins (*Calidris alpina*), and sanderlings (*Calidris alba*) depend on a large amount of horseshoe crab eggs to provide nourishment during their migrations from the tropics to northern Canada to breed. Since these birds have beaks that are unable to dig deep into the sand to uncover fatty horseshoe crab eggs, there needs to be a large population of horseshoe crabs already mating on a single beach for eggs to be uncovered from the mating efforts made by horseshoe crabs that spring.

One bird in particular, the red knot (*Calidris canutus*) feeds almost exclusively on horseshoe crab eggs during its spring stopover along the Atlantic Coast of the United States on their way to breeding grounds in the tundra of northern Canada. Although red knots have a limited migratory population along Raritan Bay and Sandy Hook Bay, regular sightings by volunteers with Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit have observed birds during spring migration at the tip of the Sandy Hook peninsula and at Conaskonk Point in Union Beach. Sightings usually occur in May with a small population of less than a dozen birds. The red knot population in November 2013 was listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2009, volunteer members of Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit (then known as the Bayshore Regional Watershed Council) approved a measure to conduct a study to monitor and tag adult horseshoe crabs at five (5) sites along Sandy Hook Bay & Raritan Bay in Monmouth County, New Jersey. The goal of the study was to obtain a better determination of the spawning population of this aquatic species, and to ascertain if the population is stable, increasing, or decreasing. In addition, by tagging horseshoe crabs, this study helps to better understand the migration patterns, abundance, and survival rates of recaptured tagged horseshoe crabs over the course of the study in the project area.

The five (5) monitoring sites along Raritan Bay & Sandy Hook Bay in Monmouth County, New Jersey include: 1) Plum Island at Sandy Hook Gateway National Recreation Area, 2) near the mouth of Many Mind Creek in the Borough of Atlantic Highlands, 3) Leonardo Beach in Middletown Township, 4) Keyport Harbor, in the Borough of Keyport, and 5) Cliffwood Beach in Aberdeen Township.

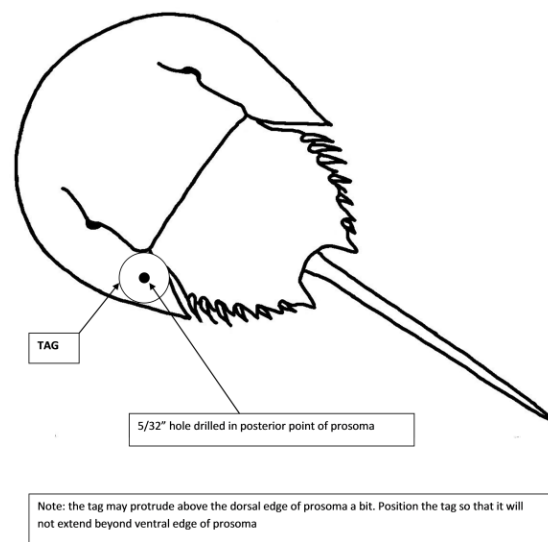
Field Methods

Data was collected during full moon and new moon high tide event cycles in May and June. Monitoring activities by volunteers were divided into two activities: (1) counting spawning populations of Horseshoe Crabs and (2) tagging single adult Horseshoe Crabs. Both activities took place at the same time (simultaneously) by volunteers during a monitoring event.

Field methods and activities for counting crab populations by watershed volunteers were similar to protocol described by the USGS in their volunteer information entitled, "SURVEYING HORSESHOE CRABS" (please see USGS web site:

<http://www.lsc.usgs.gov/aeb/2065/protocol.asp>

Protocol to Tag HSC



Only single crabs are tagged. We never tag crabs that are in pairs or clusters. Crabs are selected for tagging activities within the monitoring area or transect zone on the beach after a crab has been counted or surveyed by an observer.

We attach only one tag per animal. If the animal is damaged near the attachment area, we do not tag the animal.

1. Tags will be attached to the left posterior (rear) point of the prosoma (first section of body). There is a high concentration of fibrous material within the body in this area, which minimizes bleeding. Before drilling the attachment hole, clean off any epibionts (barnacles, etc.) near the attachment site.

2. USFWS (US Fish & Wildlife) recommends first cleaning the area where the hole will be drilled by rubbing the spot with alcohol.

3. Next the drill should be dipped into a Betadine antiseptic solution to disinfect the drill before making the hole in the shell (prosoma).

4. The tag is attached by drilling a 5/32" hole (7/64" for small tags) through the left side of the prosoma near the dorsal edge and then pushing the plastic pin (with tag) into the hole as far as it will go (it should NOT go all the way through the prosoma and come out the other side).

5. This procedure should be repeated for every individual that is being tagged.

6. Any crabs found with tags already attached to the shell are to be reported to the Beach Captain and recorded on the re-sighting form.

Field methods for tagging crab population were the same protocol as described by USFWS. Only single adult Horseshoe Crabs were tagged. Crabs that were in the process of mating were left alone so as not to interrupt the course of action. In brief, the protocol called for volunteers to attach a circular individual numbered disc to the left posterior (rear) of the prosoma (first section of body) by drilling a 5/32" hole through the side and then pushing the plastic pin (with tag) into the hole as far as it can go. Data sheets recorded the tag number, sex, prosomal width (PW) in millimeters (widest point of the crab), the date tagged, beach name, waterbed name, and state.

In 2014, two new tagging protocols were instituted as directed by US Fish and Wildlife and the National Park Service:

1. All single crabs to be tagged will first have the area where the hole will be drilled to be cleaned by rubbing the spot with alcohol.
2. Then the drill should be dipped into a Betadine antiseptic solution to disinfect the drill before making the hole in the shell (prosoma).
3. This procedure should be repeated for every individual to be tagged.
4. Any crabs found with tags already attached to the shell will be reported to the Beach Captain and recorded on a re-sighting form.

Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit received a total of 400 tags in 2023 supplied by USFWS. About 223 tags were employed this year. The tally is as follows:

96 crabs were tagged at the mouth of Many Mind Creek in Atlantic Highlands.

74 crabs were tagged at Cliffwood Beach in Aberdeen Township.

49 crabs were tagged at Plum Island at Sandy Hook.

4 crabs were tagged at Leonardo Beach in Middletown Township

A majority of horseshoe crabs tagged were single males.

Protocol to Conduct Spawning Survey

Each site will be sampled along a transect of 1,000 feet of beach.

1. The “horseshoe crab line” you will follow is not a straight line and may be above or below the water line or the surf zone - typically the area where the waves break and wash over the horseshoe crabs, especially males seeking females.

If there is an obstruction or discontinuation in the beach section (bulkhead, large boulder, etc.), pace up to the obstruction, walk to the other side of it, and then continue your pace count on the other side. Do not include the width of the obstruction in your transect.

2. Count the animals of each sex separately. If a horseshoe crab is not buried, the two most common ways to determine its sex are its size and position. Males are for the most part smaller and clasped or crowded on top of females. The first pair of appendages for males is also bulbous (like a marble), so they have the strength to clasp a female tightly. The bulbous shape is diagnostic for males.

3. To survey horseshoe crabs, you will start at one end of a marked section of beach. At the “start time,” you should begin counting all horseshoe crabs (dead or alive, single males and females, swimming pairs, buried pairs, and clusters) along a 1,000 feet of beach.

4. The Observer (first person) will walk along the “horseshoe crab line” and count out loud the number of horseshoe crabs and the Recorder (second person) records these observations on the Data Sheet. The Observer should always focus on counting horseshoe crabs that are spawning on the beach according to the following rules:

- a. Crabs above the Surf Zone (on beach): Count all that are present.
- b. Crabs in the Surf Zone: Count all that are present and include the submerged crabs that are obviously part of the spawning event.

5. Continue this way until you have sampled a 1,000 foot transect. You can stop while counting, but do not walk backwards and re-count.

RESULTS FOR 2023:

Below are the results for the fifteenth (15th) year of monitoring HSC at five sites along the edge of Sandy Hook Bay and Raritan Bay in Monmouth County, NJ. Data was collected on a total of four nights, which corresponded with full and new moon evenings.

FIRST NIGHT

Saturday, May 6, 2023

Raritan Bay & Sandy Hook Bay

Starting time: 9:00pm/ 8:00pm Plum Island

Moon Phase: FULL Moon

Water & Weather Conditions

Surface Water temperature: Upper 50s to Low 60s F

Water condition: Clear

Wave condition: Calm

Air temperature: 62 F

Sky conditions: Clear

Winds: SW 5 - 10mph

Site Name	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Plum Island	57	40	14	28	0	12	1	1	0	24
Mouth Of Many Mind Creek	161	106	55	48	0	33	20	2	0	24
Leonardo Beach	281	198	83	104	1	55	19	4	2 m 1 f	0
Keyport Harbor	86	55	31	24	0	20	20	0	0	0
Cliffwood Beach	305	208	97	23	1	58	16	22	1 u	74

m = males, f = females, u = sex unidentified

Total for all five sites monitored on Sunday, May 15, 2022

	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Total	890	607	280	227	2	178	76	29	4	122

SECOND NIGHT

Friday, May 19, 2023

Raritan Bay & Sandy Hook Bay

Starting time: 8:30pm/ 8:00pm Plum Island

Moon Phase: NEW Moon

Water & Weather Conditions

Surface Water temperature: Upper 50s to mid 60s F

Water condition: Clear to Turbid

Wave condition: Calm

Air temperature: 59 F

Sky conditions: Partly Cloudy

Winds: East 5 - 10 mph

Site Name	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Plum Island	540	458	80	359	0	45	24	7	2 u	25
Mouth Of Many Mind Creek	258	211	47	139	1	44	14	60	1 m	24
Leonardo Beach	201	168	33	124	1	19	7	6	3 m 1 u	4
Keyport Harbor	120	83	37	41	0	14	18	5	0	0
Cliffwood Beach	281	186	93	74	1	51	32	29	2 m	0

* m = males, f = females, u = sex unidentified

Total for all five sites monitored on Wednesday, May 20, 2021

	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Total	1,400	1,106	290	737	3	173	95	107	9	53

*Resight of tagged crab #437632 in Keyport Harbor
Resight of tagged crab #515663 in Atlantic Highlands*

THIRD NIGHT

Saturday, June 3, 2023

Raritan Bay & Sandy Hook Bay

Starting time: 8:00pm all sites

Moon Phase: FULL Moon

Water & Weather Conditions:

Surface Water temperature: Mid to upper 60s F

Water condition: Mostly Turbid

Wave condition: 1-foot waves

Air temperature: 61 F

Sky conditions: Cloudy

Winds: East 10 - 20 mph

***** Monitoring Activities at Plum Island, Sandy Hook were cancelled due to an extreme flood tide.***

Site Name	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Plum Island	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mouth Of Many Mind Creek	137	102	35	68	1	26	8	0	0	24
Leonardo Beach	31	23	8	17	2	6	0	0	0	0
Keyport Harbor	127	91	36	50	2	15	14	4	1m	0
Cliffwood Beach	5	3	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	0

* m = males, f = females, u = sex unidentified

Total for all five sites monitored on June 3, 2019

	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Total	300	219	81	135	5	48	2	5	1	24

Resight of tagged crab #475163 in Keyport Harbor

FOURTH NIGHT

Monday, June 19, 2023

Raritan Bay & Sandy Hook Bay

Starting time: 8:30pm/ 8:00pm Plum Island

Moon Phase: NEW Moon

Water & Weather Conditions

Surface Water temperature: Upper 60s to lower 70s F

Water condition: Mostly Turbid

Wave condition: calm

Air temperature: 71 degrees F

Sky conditions: Clear

Winds: ESE at 6 mph

Site Name	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Plum Island	50	41	7	34	0	7	0	0	2 m	0
Mouth Of Many Mind Creek	105	99	4	95	0	4	0	0	2 m 6u	24
Leonardo Beach	133	122	11	105	0	7	1	3	1m	0
Keyport Harbor	58	53	5	48	1	2	2	0	1 m	0
Cliffwood Beach	68	50	2	30	2	10	5	1	1m	0

* m = males, f = females, u = sex unidentified

Total for all five sites monitored on June 28, 2022

	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
Total	414	365	29	312	3	30	8	4	13	24

Total Horseshoe Crab activity for May & June 2023

	Total Crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	Swimming Pairs	Burrowed Pairs	Clusters	Dead crabs	Crabs Tagged
TOTAL	3,004	2,297	680	1,411	13	178	181	145	27	223

**TOTAL HSC ACTIVITY FOR THE FIVE MONITORING SITES IN THE
RARITAN BAY – SANDY HOOK BAY ESTUARINE COMPLEX FOR
YEARS: 2009 to 2023 (15 years of data).**

YEAR	Total crabs	Total males	Total females	Single males	Single females	*Swimming pairs	*Burrowing pairs	Clusters	Dead Crabs	** Crabs Tagged
2009	1,174	679	495	251	96			27	6	
2010	1,025	847	178	475	16			55	20	
2011	2,321	1,922	399	1,225	86			139	28	
2012	2,430	1,729	701	753	25			119	118	
2013	2,913	2,170	743	1,259	40	265	276	240	95	
2014	1,828	1,541	287	1,168	10	145	92	33	44	
2015	828	663	157	347	32	51	43	15	30	
2016	1,246	1,016	217	769	15	130	50	16	39	
2017	2,077	1,677	400	1066	8	154	150	70	42	
2018	6,480	5,153	1,319	2923	12	735	279	338	24	
2019	3,405	2535	862	1368	12	368	325	170	11	341
2020***	1,125	868	257	554	5	150	46	29	2	0
2021	3,522	2792	730	1,601	17	399	179	11	13	175
2022	5,299	4,159	990	2,427	22	717	259	335	30	398
2023	3,004	2,297	680	1,411	13	178	181	145	27	223

* In 2013, the parameter known as “pairs” was divided into two separate categories: “swimming pairs” and “burrowed pairs.” This was done in order to clarify better HSC mating activities at each monitoring site. Other parameters are consistent with the term of the study. The following is the total numbers of pairs (both swimming pairs and burrowing pairs) recorded from 2009 to 2012:

2009: 334
2010: 261
2011: 254
2012: 507

** In 2019 another parameter was added – how many HSC were tagged during each monitoring event. Although volunteer members have tagged crabs since the monitoring program’s inception in 2009, the field was added to better illustrate and coordinate tagging activities alongside monitoring activities for future reference.

*** 2020 was a monitoring period that was shortened due to the COVID-19 Virus outbreak. As a result, monitoring activities only took place on two dates in June (full moon and new moon). Tagging activities did not occur due to social distancing protocols at the time.

Diagrams:

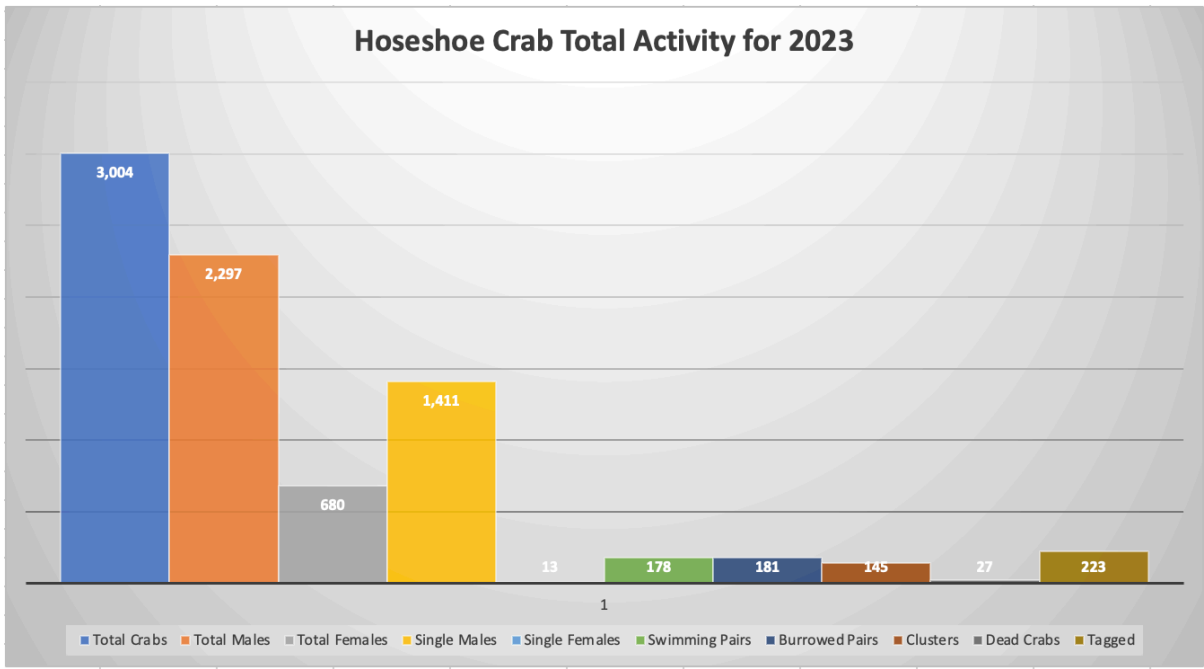


TABLE 1

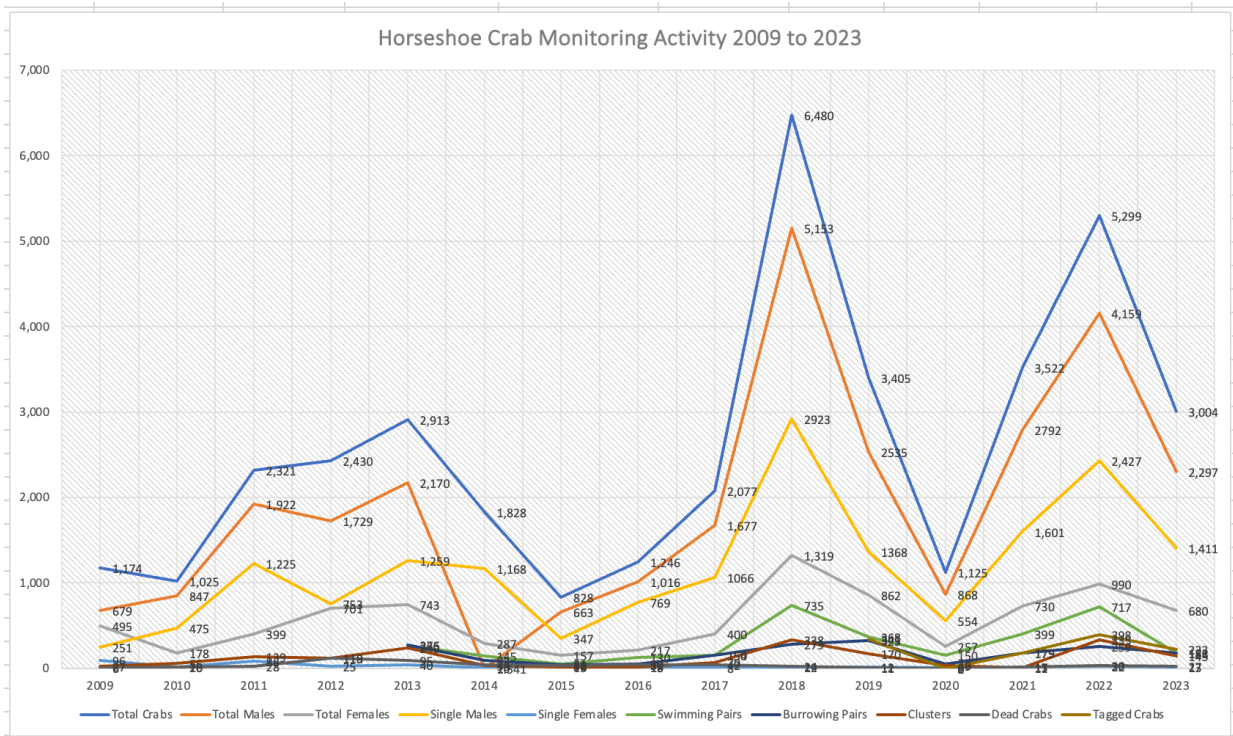


TABLE 2

RECOMMENDATIONS

There needs to be greater protection for known mating sites in Raritan Bay and Sandy Hook Bay, including Leonardo Beach in Middletown Township, Cliffwood Beach in Aberdeen Township, Keyport Harbor in the Borough of Keyport, and the mouth of Many Mind Creek in Atlantic Highlands. Horseshoe crabs congregate along estuarine beaches seasonally to spawn, which make them especially vulnerable to exploitation, either intentionally or not, by local fishermen or beachgoers. In addition, a need exists for greater public education to inform people about the importance for horseshoe crab conservation and in local estuarine ecology; and for people not to disturb spawning horseshoe crabs.

APPRECIATION

Appreciation and gratitude are given to the project partners. This study is a cooperative effort involving the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Gateway National Recreation Area, the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, Bayshore Regional Watershed Council, Save Coastal Wildlife, Brookdale Community College, Environmental Science Department, and Marine Academy of Science and Technology (M.A.S.T.) at Sandy Hook.

In addition, appreciation is given to over 80 volunteers from Save Coastal Wildlife Nonprofit, local citizens, and volunteers with the Monmouth County Park System and the Bergen County Park System, who routinely give up a bit of their time in May and June to assist in this project, so that other people might gain a better understanding of horseshoe crab activity in Raritan Bay & Sandy Hook Bay, Monmouth County, New Jersey. Without the help of everyone involved, this project would not have been accomplished.

Thank you all kindly!