

## Response from Niles and colleagues

Authors: Niles, Lawrence J., Sitters, Humphrey P., Dey, Amanda D., Bart, Jonathan, Baker, Allan J., et al.

Source: BioScience, 59(7) : 541-542

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/bio.2009.59.7.21>

---

BioOne Complete ([complete.BioOne.org](http://complete.BioOne.org)) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at [www.bioone.org/terms-of-use](http://www.bioone.org/terms-of-use).

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

---

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

### An Incomplete Analysis

Niles and colleagues (2009) do not present all of the data relevant to the issues they address in the article they wrote for *BioScience*. They reference unnamed sources for pre-1997 horseshoe crab harvest to conclude that recent harvest exceeds historic harvest. In fact, reported landings from New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia in 2006 (352 metric tons [mt]) were between landings in 1989 (365 mt) and 1990 (232 mt) ([www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st1/commercial/index.html](http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st1/commercial/index.html)), despite nonmandatory reporting coastwide before 1998 (Kreamer and Michels 2009). They present egg densities from New Jersey beaches only. Of the 11 Delaware beaches sampled, eggs in the top 5 centimeters exceeded their monitoring target of 50,000 per square meter at 5 in 2006 and at 6 in 2007 (Kalasz et al. 2008). They rely on the Delaware trawl survey for historic trends. Nine fishery-independent surveys have been used to assess trends in the Delaware Bay region, and several began before 1990 (Smith et al. 2009a).

Niles and colleagues do not consider the full scope of harvest controls that have been implemented. Harvest regulations in Delaware Bay starting in the late 1990s—including harvest quotas, seasonal closures, male-only harvest, use of bait-saving devices, and establishment of a 3885-square-kilometer no-take sanctuary—have been followed by population stabilization and increase (Smith et al. 2009a). Recent data indicate that horseshoe crab abundance has increased from a low reached in 2003–2004 following a pattern that fits the predicted demographics of a recovering population due to sex-specific maturity (Hata and Hallerman 2009, Smith et al. 2009b).

Niles and colleagues overstate the certainty of red knot population estimates by claiming a total count and disregarding uncertainties that arise when sampling birds from aircraft (Laursen et al. 2008). While we do not dispute red knot decline, we question assumptions underlying Niles and colleagues' confidence in its magnitude. In recent years approximately 7000 red knots staged their migration on the coastal islands of Virginia,

where they fed largely on *Donax* (Cohen et al. 2009).

Complete understanding of the red knot decline could be undercut by the embrace of a ruling theory that decreased horseshoe crab eggs during the Delaware Bay stopover explains everything. Niles and colleagues do not acknowledge the possibility that horseshoe crab populations could increase, but not those of the red knots. They do not mention that climate change could affect Arctic-nesting species.

Niles and colleagues propose as a temporary measure an ad hoc management action: small or no harvest until "it is clear that horseshoe crab populations are recovering and likely to reach their target." They fail to acknowledge the progress of the ongoing adaptive management process for horseshoe crabs and red knots supported by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, US Geological Survey, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Breese et al. 2007). That adaptive management process is focused on finding optimal iterative decisions among a set of management actions, which have been identified through good-faith stakeholder input.

DAVID R. SMITH  
ERIC M. HALLERMAN  
MICHAEL J. MILLARD  
JOHN A. SWEKA  
RICHARD G. WEBER

David R. Smith (e-mail: [drsmith@usgs.gov](mailto:drsmith@usgs.gov)) is with the Aquatic Ecology Branch of the US Geological Survey's Leetown Science Center in Kearneysville, West Virginia. Eric M. Hallerman is with the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences and Horseshoe Crab Research Center at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. Michael J. Millard and John A. Sweka are with the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Northeast Fishery Center in Lamar, Pennsylvania. Richard G. Weber is with Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve in Dover.

### References cited

Breese G, et al. 2007. Application of structured decision making to multi-species management

of the horseshoe crab and shorebird populations in Delaware Bay. A case study presented at the Structured Decision Making Workshop; 9–13 July 2007, Shepherdstown, West Virginia. ([http://training.fws.gov/branchsites/CSP/Resources/Decision\\_Analysis/July%2007/HSC\\_SHBD\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://training.fws.gov/branchsites/CSP/Resources/Decision_Analysis/July%2007/HSC_SHBD_Final_Report.pdf))

Cohen JB, Karpanty SM, Fraser JD, Watts BD, Truitt BR. 2009. Red knots stopover in Virginia, Delaware, and New Jersey: Numbers, residency, and interchange. *Journal of Wildlife Management*: Forthcoming.

Hata D, Hallerman E. 2009. 2008 Horseshoe Crab Trawl Survey: Report to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Horseshoe Crab Technical Committee. (4 June 2009; [www.nmfs.vt.edu/HSCwebsite/2008\\_ASMFC\\_HSC\\_trawl\\_report.pdf](http://www.nmfs.vt.edu/HSCwebsite/2008_ASMFC_HSC_trawl_report.pdf))

Kalasz KS, Hernandez DE, Dey AD. 2008. Delaware Bay Egg Survey: 2005–2007. Report to the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Shorebird Technical Committee. US Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Bird Management.

Kreamer G, Michels S. 2009. History of horseshoe crab harvest in Delaware Bay. Pages 299–313 in Tanacredi JT, Botton ML, Smith DR, eds. *Biology and Conservation of Horseshoe Crabs*. Springer.

Laursen K, Frikke J, Kahlert J. 2008. Accuracy of 'total counts' of waterbirds from aircraft in coastal waters. *Wildlife Biology* 14: 165–175.

Niles LJ, et al. 2009. Effects of horseshoe crab harvest in Delaware Bay on red knots: Are harvest restrictions working? *BioScience* 59: 153–164.

Smith DR, Mandt MT, Macdonald PDM. 2009a. Proximate causes of sexual size dimorphism in horseshoe crabs (*Limulus polyphemus*) of the Delaware Bay. *Journal of Shellfish Research* 28: 405–417.

Smith DR, Millard ML, Carmichael RH. 2009b. Comparative status and assessment of *Limulus polyphemus* with emphasis on the New England and Delaware Bay populations. Pages 361–386 in Tanacredi JT, Botton ML, Smith DR, eds. *Biology and Conservation of Horseshoe Crabs*. Springer.

doi:10.1525/bio.2009.59.7.20

### Response from Niles and colleagues

These crab harvest data confirm the scenario we described, though the increase started earlier (1989, not 1991). Mean annual landings on the US Atlantic coast from 1970 to 1988 (211 metric tons [mt]) were less than 2006 landings in four states (352 mt), indicating that recent harvest exceeds historic harvest. However, pre-1998 data may be underestimates because of nonmandatory reporting.

We presented egg-density data for New Jersey to show the long-term trend. Data for Delaware are not sufficiently long term to

reflect changes caused by the increased crab harvest. Recent surveys show egg densities are higher in Delaware than in New Jersey. We cannot explain this, as it is not reflected by spawning crab densities (Niles et al. 2008).

We agree that several surveys have documented horseshoe crab population trends. Overwhelmingly, they show the same decline as the Delaware 30-foot trawl survey did, which is most relevant as it measures trends within the Delaware Bay.

Several measures have been taken to control the horseshoe crab harvest; however, especially in the 1990s, these proved insufficient to arrest the decline because they failed to take adequate account of the species' long maturation. While the crab population may be on the cusp of recovery, as of 2008 only the offshore trawl showed an increase; spawning females on Delaware Bay beaches (most relevant to egg densities and shorebirds) have not increased (Michels et al. 2009). Moreover, the Delaware Bay 30-foot trawl survey showed a decline in 2008 (Stewart F. Michels, Division of Fish and Wildlife, Delaware Department of National Resources and Environmental Control, Dover, personal communication, 3 June 2009). Recovery of shorebirds requires a sustained increase of the crab population to mid-1990 levels.

Laursen and colleagues (2008) studied aerial counts in 850 square kilometers of a highly fragmented wetland. Five species showed no statistical difference between ground and aerial counts, so Laursen and colleagues are generally supportive of the accuracy of aerial counts. Delaware Bay and Tierra del Fuego have simple linear coastlines that allow accurate counting, especially by the experienced personnel involved.

In response to a petition to list the rufa subspecies of the red knot under the Endangered Species Act, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) commissioned an assessment of all threats to its population. The review by 22 authors (Niles et al. 2008) identified factors that could have an impact on rufa breeding, wintering, and stopover sites. Nevertheless, the FWS concluded, "The primary factor threatening the red knot is destruction and modification of its habitat, particularly the reduction in key food resources resulting from reductions in horseshoe crabs" (73 CFR 238). It is unreasonable to suggest that 22 authors and FWS staff should be so influenced by a "ruling theory" as to reach an erroneous conclusion.

We agree red knots may not increase immediately even if horseshoe crabs are restored, but we expect they will. Niles and colleagues (2008) considered the impacts of climate change, suggesting a potential short-term benefit from a longer Arctic breeding season; however, major habitat loss may result as vegetation zones shift northward.

We mentioned the adaptive management initiative. We agree this effort has since made progress, but it is, as yet, unfinished. In the meantime, we reiterate our recommendation for a risk-averse approach to the management of the horseshoe crab harvest.

LAWRENCE J. NILES  
HUMPHREY P. SITTERS  
AMANDA D. DEY  
JONATHAN BART  
ALLAN J. BAKER  
R. I. GUY MORRISON  
KEVIN S. KALASZ  
NIGEL A. CLARK

Lawrence J. Niles (e-mail: [larry.niles@conservewildlifenj.org](mailto:larry.niles@conservewildlifenj.org)) is chief biologist with the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey in Bordentown. Humphrey P. Sitters is an editor with the International Wader Study Group in Exeter, United Kingdom. Amanda D. Dey is principal zoologist at the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, Endangered and Nongame Species Program, in Trenton. Jonathan Bart is a research wildlife biologist with the US Geological Survey, Forest and Rangeland Ecosystem Science Center, Snake River Field Station, in Boise, Idaho. Allan J. Baker is head of the Department of Natural History of the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada. R. I. Guy Morrison is a research scientist with the National Wildlife Research Centre, Carleton University, Canadian Wildlife Service. Kevin S. Kalasz is a wildlife biologist with the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program in Dover. Nigel A. Clark is head of projects with the British Trust for Ornithology in Norfolk, United Kingdom.

#### References cited

- Laursen K, Frikke J, Kahlert J. 2008. Accuracy of 'total counts' of waterbirds from aircraft in coastal waters. *Wildlife Biology* 14: 165–175.
- Michels SF, Smith D, Bennett S. 2008. Horseshoe Crab Spawning Activity in Delaware Bay: 1999–2007: Report to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Horseshoe Crab Technical Committee. Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.
- Niles LJ, et al. 2008. Status of the red knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*) in the Western Hemisphere. Cooper Ornithological Society. *Studies in Avian Biology* 36. (4 June 2009; [myfwc.com/docs/Conservation/FBCI\\_StatusoftheRedKnot.pdf](http://myfwc.com/docs/Conservation/FBCI_StatusoftheRedKnot.pdf))

doi:10.1525/bio.2009.59.7.21