

EASTERN HELLBENDER

Pennsylvania's Official State Amphibian



photo-Christopher Guerrisi

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“It was no small feat to get this recognition for the hellbender,” said Governor Tom Wolf before signing a bill that designated the Eastern Hellbender, *Cryptobranchus alleganiensis alleganiensis*, as Pennsylvania’s official state amphibian.

“I want to thank the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) and also acknowledge the hard work of the Foundation’s Student Leadership Program,” said the Governor. “The voices of students can clearly make a difference here in Harrisburg.”

Since 2016, CBF’s Student Leadership Council (SLC) members have spearheaded the campaign to recognize the Eastern Hellbender and create greater awareness of the critical need to reduce pollution in Pennsylvania’s rivers and streams.

Hellbenders are an indicator species for clean water. They survive where there is cold, clear, swift-running water.

Students studied hellbenders extensively, installed nesting boxes in several Pennsylvania streams and wrote the first draft of a bill that was sponsored by Senator Gene Yaw (R-Lycoming) and passed the Senate last year. Though the bill did not pass the House before the session ended, the students did not give up.

When the new session began in January, the students again found Senator Yaw to be their champion. He reintroduced the effort as Senate Bill 9, which was signed into law by Governor Wolf. The bill was passed overwhelmingly by the Senate and House on February 4 and April 16 respectively.

“This bill is more than just about naming a new symbol for our state,” said Senator Gene Yaw. “It is about fostering youth involvement in the legislative process, and championing an issue through that process. It’s about advocating for clean water in Pennsylvania and promoting conservation programs that improve water quality for all of our species. The uniqueness of the hellbender and its contribution to aquatic biological diversity are adequate justifications for this remarkable designation. I applaud Governor Wolf for recognizing the importance of the hellbender to our state, and also for affirming for our young citizens that they can make a difference if they get involved in the governmental process.”

“It is my hope that other student leaders across the Commonwealth may be inspired by our work,” said SLC President Emma Stone. “That they too will take action on behalf of the hellbender and clean water in the Commonwealth.”

Making change is possible, no matter your age. All you need is dedication, support and, of course, a worthy cause. The hellbender is a worthy cause.”

“Today’s ceremony is about more than a declaration of an official state amphibian. It’s about reaffirming our commitment to protecting our waters in Pennsylvania,” said Governor Tom Wolf. “Clean water is critical for the hellbender, and we need to continue to do our part to improve water quality in the Commonwealth so that the state’s first amphibian can thrive.”

Hellbenders prefer rocky streambeds. Their spongelike bodies allow them to squeeze into crevices, which they use for protection and for nesting. Folds of wrinkled skin provide a large surface through which they draw most of their oxygen.

Senator Yaw remembered days as a youngster catching hellbenders in the local creek. “They are a natural barometer of water quality, and they live where the water is clean,” said Senator Yaw. “If they are surviving in streams, it is a good sign for the water quality. They are nature’s own testing kit for good water quality.”

A lack of streamside trees along Commonwealth waterways allows waters to warm, polluted runoff to enter rivers and streams, and silt to build up in streambeds. As a result, habitat for hellbenders has been degraded and hellbender numbers have been decimated in streams where they were plentiful as recently as 1990.

“I am proud to have introduced a companion bill to Senator Yaw’s and am happy that this legislation has made its way to the governor’s desk,” said Representative Sheryl Delozier (R-Cumberland).

“As much as this effort has been about the hellbender and clean water, it’s also a story about the creativity and passion of these student leaders,” said Harry Campbell, CBF’s Executive Director in Pennsylvania.

The students’ hellbender campaign garnered local, state and national attention, making it onto the front page of the Wall Street Journal and as subject of the iconic Mark Trail Sunday comic strip. A radio station in Canada interviewed Emma Stone.

“CBF would like to thank Governor Wolf, Senator Yaw and all the legislators who supported both the hellbender and our student leaders,” said SLC Coordinator Emily Thorpe.

For more information about the Eastern Hellbender campaign, visit www.cbf.org/hellbender. ☐