Missed Opportunity

Suffolk County lawmakers missed a chance to show that they truly understand the dangers that certain chemicals can pose to the marine environment, and the tiniest creatures that call it home.

The legislative body earlier this year banned microbeads—tiny plastic particles that serve as abrasives in beauty products—because they do not break down naturally and can end up being eaten by fish. A very reasonable vote on a matter of some importance, and with at least some impact on the marine environment.

And then, last week, the same legislature once more signed off on the use of a controversial insecticide that will be sprayed in wetlands next year to help control mosquitoes. An unreasonable vote on a matter of intense importance, with a measurable, devastating impact on the marine ecosystem.

In its approval of Suffolk County Vector Control's spraying plan for 2016, the County Legislature last week again ignored actions taken by their counterparts in Rhode Island and Connecticut three years earlier, when they restricted the use of methoprene—an insecticide that attacks mosquitoes at the larval stage—because the poison can also be toxic to baby crabs and lobsters, which share genetic traits with the insects. Specifically, lawmakers in those states prohibited its spraying along coastal areas and wetlands after the tissue samples of dead lobsters taken from Long Island Sound included traces of the poison. A simple and smart solution.

Lawmakers in both of those states understand all too well what can happen if too much of a poison is dumped in saltwater; studies have pointed to the continued use of such larvicides, typically to combat the spread of West Nile virus, as a key factor in the lobster die-offs that decimated that industry in the Long Island Sound region.

Suffolk County lawmakers faced a similar crossroads in the 1960s, when the then-widespread utilization of the pesticide commonly known as DDT almost wiped out Long Island's once-vibrant osprey population. County legislators were on the front lines of that important battle, and they fought the good fight, banning the pesticide's use locally and starting a national movement that would eventually lead to DDT being outlawed in 1972 by the Environmental Protection Agency.

So, what's changed since the 1960s—aside from the names and fashion sense of the 18 people now sitting behind the dais in Hauppauge? While it is anyone's guess, it appears that our current county legislators prefer the path of least resistance. Targeting wetlands is a way to kill mosquitoes in the larval stage, and it keeps Vector Control trucks away from residential neighborhoods, where homeowners object to spraying for adult mosquitoes, fearing exposure to chemicals that could potentially cause them, and their children, harm.

It's a great argument—one that would be made by the tiniest (and, let's be honest, economically essential) aquatic organisms inhabiting the East End's once-vibrant wetlands and bays, if only they had a voice, or, in this instance, lawmakers willing to fight on their behalf.