

Television Documentary To Explore Cape Fear River Issues

Otters swim in it, cities drink from it and discharge their treated waste waters into it. Bald eagles fly along its shores, pelicans nest on its islands and fertilizers flow into it. It cools nuclear reactors and industrial processes.

The Cape Fear River is all these things and more. Even before it is the Cape Fear, the river meanders its way through Guilford County to the southwest where it is called the Haw River and Rockingham County to the north where it is called the Deep River. Along its 200-mile journey to the Atlantic, it winds through 29 North Carolina counties, intermingling with dozens of smaller rivers, tributaries, swamps and finally winding through one of the major estuaries of the east coast.

At various points it is navigable only by canoe or Jon boat, yet it widens and deepens steadily until it welcomes ocean-going freighters at the port of Wilmington.

Despite its obvious importance to North Carolina, relatively little is known about the Cape Fear River. Dr. James Merritt, director of the Center for Marine Science Research at UNC-Wilmington, said, "If you ask me if the water is clean, is it safe to drink, I'll have to say: 'Yes. Well, I think so. Maybe. I really don't know because there are so many factors affecting water quality.'"

Merritt is working to eliminate that data gap and to bring to fruition the Cape Fear River Program, a citizen-funded, long-term research and monitoring program on the river. Merritt said there is no lack of data on water quality, simply the absence of a coordinated manner in which to collect and interpret the data.

Government agencies and businesses which are required to collect data do so using varying strategies. "All the samples may show clean water, but these samples are taken at different times using different sampling methods. To be realistic, sampling has to take into account tidal flow, has to be taken at the same time on a consistent schedule and by the same methods over a long expanse of the river," he said. For any action considered along the river basin, "we need to know how that action will affect the river. We need to have definitive answers, and that's what the plan is designed to give us."

As a first step in this emerging Cape Fear River Program, UNCW has produced a documentary examining a three-day journey down the river by university scientists. Traveling with a film crew from N.C. State University's Broadcast Services, they examine the river's ecosystem, its history and some of the many questions which have arisen as the state government and industry consider the river's future.

Scheduled to air at 9 p.m. Monday, June 13 on University of

North Carolina Television, "River Run: Down the Cape Fear River to the Sea," describes the river's relationship with its wildlife, discusses various sources of possible pollution, describes examples of successful utilization of the river as a resource, and more. It also asks more questions than it answers, including: Can the river support additional development and residential and industrial growth without harm to its ecosystem, particularly the vital primary nursery area at the mouth of the Cape Fear? The answer now, says Merritt, is, "We don't know."

The program has received major funding from AAI and CP&L. Contributions from these and other companies and individuals will go toward hiring a full-time director for the Cape Fear River Program and to develop and implement the monitoring plan. Working with business leaders and government regulatory personnel to develop a plan for long-term, consistent monitoring, the university's goal is to provide reliable water quality indicators and fish population health indicators.

The plan's scope covers the entire Cape Fear River Basin which includes the various streams, tributaries and wetlands on either side of the Cape Fear, Haw and Deep rivers, because what happens on one end of the river affects life forms and river health all the way down the basin. The cities of Cary and Apex take their drinking water from the Cape Fear through Jordan Lake and discharge the treated wastewater into the Neuse River. This affects the flow of both the Cape Fear and the Neuse.

"I see the availability of drinking water as being an increasingly important political issue," says UNCW Chancellor James Leutze. "We've seen the issue of inter-basin transfer played out internally between the U.S. and Mexico and stateside, particularly in our west with the Colorado River and the Rio Grande."

Leutze said that as populations grow, the need for water increases and elected officials have the need to provide water in the most cost-effective manner possible. With Wake County's population expected to grow more than 20 percent this decade, the possibility of pulling more water from the Cape Fear and "shunting the water into the nearest tributary which may not be back into the original river system" becomes more obvious. The research process will initially cover the area from the ocean to Lock & Dam #1 and the Northeast Cape Fear up to Castle Hayne. "We can't possibly monitor the entire river from one end of it," Merritt said, "so we'll be working with other organizations along the river to put the plan in place basin-wide."

Interest in the Cape Fear and

North Carolina's other rivers is so great that the Oregon-based advocacy group, River Network, lists 69 North Carolina groups and individuals, many of them along the Cape Fear, working to safeguard river

quality and to promote the river as a multi-use resource. Ninety-four such groups in the basin counties are listed by the UNC-CH School of Public Health.

The long-term solution to many

of the river's potential problems is "to educate the citizenry to the biological systems and processes such that they understand our relationship to the river," Merritt said. "Fishermen need the river; indus-

tries need the rivers to operate and citizens need the industries for jobs. Most of us get our drinking water from the river. If we understand these things, we won't trash the resource."



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

From Beech To Beach

Academically gifted eighth grade students from Valle Crucis and Cove Creek schools in Watauga County, where the view includes Beech Mountain, began a fast-paced cultural exchange weekend in the South Brunswick Islands with a breakfast brunch Friday at Shallotte Middle School, sponsored by the South Brunswick Woman's Club. Hosts for their weekend were students in Debbie Lemon's eighth grade academically gifted class, who visited Kitty Hailey's Watauga County students this winter as part of the year-long exchange. The Watauga students joined Shallotte students in visits to local beaches, a ferry trip to the state aquarium at Fort Fisher, swimming at Brierwood Golf Club, Calabash seafood, putt-putt golf and an evening at the Myrtle Beach Pavilion, concluding with a breakfast buffet Sunday at Ocean Isle Beach.

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