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Conservatory is Alive with Freshwater Wonders at North Carolina Aquarium

KURE BEACH – You will not believe your senses as you step into the Cape Fear Conservatory at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher for the first time.

Inside this enormous, glass-covered atrium, within yards of the ocean's shore, you will encounter ponds and waterfalls, trees and ferns, fishes and turtles, alligators and dragonflies – all part of the freshwater wonderland of the Cape Fear River and its watershed.

The conservatory's tour of aquatic habitats begins at Raven Rock, the source of the Cape Fear River. Here, water cascades down a rock face into a deep pool, then pours into a second basin to begin its long journey to the sea.

The freshwater fishes you see in these glass-walled pools are those found where the Cape Fear first tumbles from the Piedmont highlands onto the coastal plain – striped bass, shortnose sturgeon, common carp and yellow perch.

Downstream, currents scour a deep hole at a bend in the river. This is the lair of the Hidden Hunters – large, predatory fishes in search of a meal. You'll see bowfin, channel catfish, chain pickerel, long-nose gar and more.

Nearby, inspect a collection of venomous snakes, including native species of rattlesnakes and cottonmouths. This stream-bank habitat includes brown, redbelly and banded water snakes – all behind glass panels.

In one of the larger exhibits, a half a dozen American alligators bask on the muddy banks of Town Creek. Watch them underwater as they plunge in for a swim.

At Roan Island, stop and linger on the wooden footbridge next to a cypress-ringed blackwater pond. Water pours over a fallen tree, then passes beneath you in a rushing stream. Look through the glass behind the waterfall for the fishes of the cypress swamps – redear sunfish, pumpkinseed, bluegill and crappie.

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES
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at Fort Fisher

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Next, stroll across the footbridge to the Carolina Bay habitat area. Named for the bay trees that grow around them, these shallow oval depressions depend on rain or underground springs for their water supply. The “vernal pools,” like the one you see here, provide homes for frogs, toads, salamanders and other amphibians that survive dry periods.

At the edges of Carolina Bay, look for some of the fascinating carnivorous plants found in the Cape Fear River’s watershed – the pitcher plant, sundew and Venus flytrap. New additions to this exhibit include tree frogs, flathead catfish, and a large two-toed amphiuma salamander.

The animal species of the conservatory, along with the hundreds of trees, ferns and other plants within the sprawling 22,000-square-foot complex, thrive on sunlight that streams through the glass canopy overhead. To help maintain humidity levels, a fog distribution network hidden among the plants delivers a fine mist of water throughout the building. Temperatures inside the conservatory, though controllable, are allowed to fluctuate through normal day-and-night patterns to simulate natural conditions.

The conservatory’s life support systems operate continuously behind the public area to circulate filtered, conditioned water through the exhibitions. Exhibits are constantly monitored to ensure proper temperature and chemical balances.

The Cape Fear Conservatory is the largest structure added to the aquarium during the two-year expansion project, which was completed in March 2002. The conservatory, with its focus on freshwater habitats, is complemented by another major addition; the 235,000-gallon Cape Fear Shoals saltwater exhibit.

For details, contact Amy Kilgore or Donna Moffitt at (910) 458-8257. For complete information and program schedules, visit: www.ncaquariums.com.