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History of the North Carolina Aquariums

In the early 1970s, three multi-purpose marine centers were built on the coast of North Carolina. The cost was \$4.6 million, with \$2.7 million coming as a federal grant from the Coastal Plains Regional Commission, and the remainder from the state matching of those funds. The goals in establishing the new facilities were to enhance coastal environmental education for the public, schools and teachers, and to boost the coastal and state economies. The marine centers were originally administered by the North Carolina Office of Marine Affairs, a multi-purpose agency within the Department of Administration.

In 1976, the three facilities were opened and were visited by a total of 341,000 people in their first year of operation. Subsequently, the number of visitors, school groups and programs grew steadily, and visitation has topped one million each year since 1985.

In 1986, the names were changed to The North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher (Wilmington area), The North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores (Atlantic Beach, Morehead City area) and The North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island (Manteo). Thus, their mission was brought into focus and the educational effort was more clearly defined.

The North Carolina Aquarium Society, a statewide non-profit group whose mission is to support the three aquariums, was established that same year. Membership in the aquariums was made possible for the general public and interest in the aquariums grew rapidly.

In 1990, the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), now the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, accredited all three North Carolina Aquariums. The N.C. Aquarium at Fort Fisher was last inspected and re-accredited in 2007.

Today, the North Carolina Aquariums play a major role in aquatic and environmental education in our state, providing a wide variety of experiences for families, students, teachers and other groups. The 5,000 opportunities offered yearly is a measure of the commitment of the staff to achieve their mission. More than 60,000



at Fort Fisher

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school students visit every year and are exposed to the unique environmental settings of the aquariums.

Each facility includes aquarium displays, touch tanks, interactive exhibits, classrooms, meeting rooms, live animal programs, field trips, boat trips, lectures, behind the scenes tours, children's programs, marine-related arts and crafts programs and teacher workshops. Public visitation and demand for program participation has far exceeded the original expectations.

Administratively, the aquariums became a separate and distinct division in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in 1993. They are grouped with the North Carolina Zoological Park, the State Museum of Natural Sciences, State Parks and other similar units.

The three aquariums are now recognized as major components of North Carolina's tourism industry. With about one million visitors annually, the three facilities are among the top attractions in the state. A study has shown that they directly contribute more than \$27 million to the state's economy yearly.

In May 1994, for the first time in their history, the North Carolina Aquariums began charging an admission fee. This fee had been recommended by the Aquariums Commission pursuant to G.S. 143.B-344.17. The fee structure at The North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher is now \$8 for adults, \$7 for senior citizens, and \$6 for visitors under 18. Students in registered school groups, Aquarium Society members, children under 6, AZA members, and members of aquariums and zoos with reciprocal agreements are admitted free. Revenues from the fees are used for new exhibit construction, maintenance, repairs and seasonal staff.

As the three facilities began to show the effects of nearly 20 years' service in a coastal environment, plans were initiated in 1989 for their renovation and expansion. Enlarging and improving all three aquariums would add significantly to their total impact in education and economic development. The plan required \$15 million for each Aquarium, for a total of \$45 million in state funds. The North Carolina Aquarium Society would raise an additional \$3-to-6 million from the private sector.

Construction was completed on the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island expansion in May 2000. The two-year expansion and renovation of the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher culminated with a Grand Reopening of that facility in March 2002.

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES
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Although the North Carolina General Assembly funded \$15 million for expansion of the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, contracts had not been finalized when eastern North Carolina was devastated by Hurricane Floyd's floodwaters during early fall of 1999. Funding for that aquarium's expansion was rescinded to meet post-hurricane needs, thus temporarily delaying expansion of that facility. The expanded Pine Knoll Shores facility reopened in May 2006.

The expansions more than tripled the size of each aquarium and nearly tripled the full-time staffing. These improvements are producing huge gains in program opportunities and spurring new initiatives in conservation and research.

The North Carolina Aquariums, located in unique aquatic environments, have a built-in market of coastal visitors and residents. Their established popularity, ambitious educational programs, and capable staffs continue to make the aquariums leaders in combining environmental education and eco-tourism. They are among the nation's most cost-effective aquariums.

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