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“Waters of the Cape Fear” Theme for North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher

KURE BEACH – Visitors can travel a journey “from the river to the sea” during their visit to the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.

The aquarium’s theme celebrates the broad spectrum of plant and animal life found in, around, and beyond the Cape Fear River basin. The river flows from the Piedmont region, through the coastal plain near Wilmington, and out into the open ocean near the aquarium itself.

Visitors first encounter several freshwater exhibits, all within a huge, tree-filled atrium called the **Cape Fear Conservatory**. This magnificent half-acre space includes ponds and waterfalls, running streams, alligators, aquatic snakes, carnivorous plants and the variety of fishes found in the watershed of the Cape Fear River. In 2008, a pair of wood ducks and a dozen bobwhite quail were added. All of the birds are free to roam the conservatory.

Aquarium visitors then stroll into the **Coastal Waters Gallery**, where the river meets the sea. Buzzard Bay contains fiddler crabs, hermit crabs, a variety of juvenile fishes, and other creatures of the salt-marsh ecosystem. Nearby, a seahorse and a loggerhead sea turtle exhibit help explain beach environments. The Coquina Outcrop Touch Pool offers hands-on encounters with stingrays, sea stars, horseshoe crabs and shoreline animals. Just steps away, Masonboro Inlet Jetty showcases bluefish, red drum, and other coastal fishermen’s favorites.

A curved mezzanine then directs aquarium visitors to the **Open Ocean Gallery** and its focal point – the 235,000-gallon Cape Fear Shoals exhibit. Multiple windows of this spectacular 24-foot-deep aquarium offer splendid views of more than 300 saltwater creatures. Here, there are nearly 30 species, including sharks, lobsters, moray eels, sea turtles and colorful reef and ocean fishes. Nearby, additional exhibits focus on jellyfish, corals and – as of 2005 – an octopus.



at Fort Fisher

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Twice each day, divers inside the **Cape Fear Shoals** tank use underwater communication equipment to converse with visitors about the creatures swimming around them. On any given day, divers may be seen performing maintenance and animal-care tasks inside one or more of the aquarium's exhibits.

Exotic Aquatics, a major new exhibit that opened in November 2005, features species from Indo-Pacific, European and Mediterranean waters. These include lionfish, spiny lobsters, dart frogs, and a variety of colorful coral-reef fishes.

And finally, across the way, the journey from the river to the sea ends by once again rising to the surface, and the gentle sway of the surf zone, where a dozen skates, rays, and bonnetheads can be seen cruising through the **Shadows on the Sand** exhibit.

In addition to the animals on display, the aquarium offers regular educational programs, interactive presentations, and films. Twice each day at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., the aquarium performs public feedings of exhibits.

Education has been the primary mission of the North Carolina Aquariums since 1976. At The North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher, the Education Curator continues to expand a schedule of interactive instructional programs in cooperation with public and private schools, as well as with many community organizations.

The 2002 reopening marked the completion of two-thirds of the North Carolina Aquariums' expansion effort. The expanded Roanoke Island facility was reopened in 2000, and the final third of the expansion project was completed on May 19, 2006, when the facility at Pine Knoll Shores reopened. The first funding for expansions was approved by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1993. Additional appropriations have made it possible to proceed with projects whose purpose is to improve educational and recreational opportunities for visitors. The non-profit North Carolina Aquarium Society has provided additional funds through gift shop sales, family memberships, corporate and private donations and its grass-roots "Help Fill the Tanks" campaign. Admission fees, generated since 1994, have also been earmarked to help fund the expansions.

Administered by the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the state's three aquariums are designed to inspire appreciation and conservation of North Carolina's aquatic environments. The architect for the expansion project at Fort Fisher was Herb McKim, BMS Architects, Wilmington, NC. The General Contractor was Clancy & Theys Construction Company.

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES
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