

Coastal Living

UNC-IMS to celebrate its 70th anniversary Institute to hold open house Saturday to commemorate

BY MIKE SHUTAK
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For decades, UNC's Institute of Marine Sciences has offered students training in various fields of marine research, as well as provided various officials and organizations with studies and data to help inform them of the state of the marine environment.

Now UNC-IMS is preparing for its 70th anniversary celebration. The institute, located at 3431 Arendell St. in Morehead City, will hold an open house from 1-4 p.m. Saturday. This free event will feature scientific demonstrations and children's activities.

Dr. Rick Luettich, IMS director, said faculty, staff and students at IMS are all getting excited as the day of the celebration approaches.

"Most of the folks weren't there for the whole 70 years," he said, "but it's a good time to reflect on all that's been accomplished. We're sharing with the public the great things going on (at IMS)."

IMS communications and outreach representative Kerry Irish is organizing the open house, according to Dr. Luettich. He said faculty and staff are setting up exhibits on the ongoing projects and studies they're doing.

"One of our important roles is to be a window to the community for the university," Dr. Luettich said.

Ms. Irish said that she and other IMS officials hope a lot of people in the local community come out to the open house.

"It's going to be a family-friendly, free event," she said. "It's science that's important to our community."

Dr. Luettich has been at IMS since about 1976. He said that in that time, he's seen a lot of changes occur.

"When I got here, our only connection to the rest of the world was a single long-distance phone line," he said. "Now, with the current technology, we can connect with the main campus (UNC-Chapel Hill) and with CMAST (the N.C. State University Center for Marine Sciences and Technology, also located in Morehead City). Technology has improved our ability to do science effectively and to collaborate."

In addition to improving the institute's ability to communicate, technological advances

have helped researchers at IMS more effectively study the ocean.

"We can track individual fish," Dr. Luettich said. "It's revolutionized our ability to observe what's going on in the ocean. We can identify trace organisms by their genetic fingerprint."

Dr. Luettich said he and the rest of the staff and faculty at IMS are grateful to the support UNC-Chapel Hill has given them, helping update and improve the facility. He still remembers a time when things at IMS didn't always run smoothly.

"One memory that sticks out is one day when I came in, and my lab was covered in soot," Dr. Luettich said. "The furnace wasn't working, and was putting out black smoke. I went to open a window, and it almost fell out."

These days, Dr. Luettich says the lab is "in something of a state of constant change," as new developments and discoveries are made in the field of marine science.

"We're always looking for ways to improve how we can bring information on the state of the ocean to North Carolina," he said.

Another long-standing member of the faculty at IMS is Dr. Pete Peterson, alumni distinguished professor of marine sciences, biology and ecology, who came to the institute in 1978. Dr. Peterson said this anniversary will be "another milestone in a long series of milestones," for IMS.

"It's nice to have opportunities to educate the public and guide their interests," Dr. Peterson said. "IMS has been a central organization in multi-institute, multi-state and multi-nation projects."

Dr. Peterson said IMS has seen various changes of substance over the years, such as the merger of its physical science and hydrodynamics programs. This has proven important in the institute's work helping to develop "green shorelines," a form of shoreline that's effective at stopping erosion, while being more environmentally friendly than bulkheads.

Dr. Peterson's lab has also been active in community outreach work.

"My students have been involved in programs taking our science to (K-12) classrooms," he said. "That's a mission not



Francesca Peay, left, and Lauren Clarice, right, two graduate students at the UNC Institute of Marine Sciences, process samples for a study on how marsh grasses affect fish diversity, the kind of research IMS will be recognizing at its open house event Saturday. (Mike Shutak photo)



The UNC Institute of Marine Sciences in Morehead City is holding a celebration Saturday for its anniversary. (Dylan Ray photo)

usually a part of a research lab, but one we've adopted to make our research more accessible."

Dr. Hans Paerl, William R. Kenan Professor of microbial ecology and nutrient cycling, is another long-standing member of the faculty, also hired in 1978, though later that year from Dr. Peterson's hiring. Dr. Paerl said that when he first came to IMS, he was brought down from UNC-Chapel Hill's main campus by Dr. Peterson.

"He picked me up and prepared me to not be shocked by the space I'd be occupying," Dr. Paerl said. "It was full of cobwebs and broken glass. It had not been used in a long time."

While prior to Dr. Paerl's tenure, IMS had mostly done some fisheries studies and little else, that changed as many of the institute's current faculty members were hired.

"I was fortunate to get in as the institute got more interested in local and global problems," he said, referring to such issues as algal blooms, nutrient water

pollution, sea level rise and global warming. "The institute went through an evolutionary step ... We've done everything for cellular studies to regional issues. We've increased in both diversity and scale (of research). We have some forward-looking thinking to be thankful for, like from our former director, Dr. Dirk Frankenberg."

Dr. Paerl said once people are hired at IMS, very few of them

want to leave.

"We've only had a few faculty (positions) turn over," he said. "We've appreciated the importance of the institute as a source of local, state and federal research."

Among the research programs Dr. Paerl himself has had a hand in is FerryMon, a program that outfitted several N.C. Department of Transportation ferries with sensors to gather

water data like temperature and salinity. Dr. Paerl said these programs have also provided great teaching tools, with grad students using them for writing theses.

"We've come a long way from a sleepy fisheries institute to a crown jewel for UNC-Chapel Hill," he said. "We're recognized all the way up to the chancellor. We've worked hard to do that."

PKS Aquarium to release 27 sea turtles off the coast

The N.C. Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores is scheduled to release 27 sea turtles 50 miles off the coast Wednesday. Many of the sea turtles being released are participants of the sea turtle loan program, which allows several aquariums across the nation to participate in the care of this endangered species.

According to Michelle Lamping, an aquarium aquarist, loggerheads, which make up the majority of sea turtle nests in North Carolina, do not return to inshore waters until they are roughly 15 years old. This is why juvenile loggerheads are released offshore in the habitat in which they live.

"The aquarium aids sea turtles who need a helping hand and this includes hatchlings," said Ms. Lamping.

The aquarium collaborates with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission to help save numerous distressed hatchlings that, for various reasons, would not survive without assistance.

When sea turtle hatchlings emerge from their sandy nests, not all make it to the ocean. The commission manages sea turtle monitoring and rescue efforts on

state beaches through the N.C. Sea Turtle Project.

"Volunteers monitor nests and bring in hatchling turtles that need assistance, whether they are from an excavation or a stranding," said Ms. Lamping.

This program consists of several volunteer groups that patrol the beaches from April to October for evidence of sea turtle nests and safe guards established nests during hatching season.

The aquarium provides a safe haven for dozens of tiny turtles, brought in by volunteers across Bogue Banks, whose chances of survival would be slim due to injury, weakness, weather or negative human interference.

Some of the young turtles act as animal ambassadors and help further the conservation message.

Their specialized habitats at each aquarium allow for a unique educational experience for visitors. Programs featuring the turtles introduce these endangered or threatened species to school children and other groups.

"Education is so important

for the survival of this species and at the aquarium. We provide opportunities for our guests get up close to these amazing animals," said Hap Fatzinger, director of the aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores. "Through education comes understanding, and with understanding, people can make better decisions that will ultimately help sea turtles in the wild and in human care."

Each year all three of the N.C. Aquariums release rehabilitated turtles and those previously loaned to other institutions.

This year, there are seven aquariums participating in the loan program - National Aquarium in Baltimore, Md.; Newport Aquarium in Kentucky; Adventure Aquarium in New Jersey; Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut; The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk, Conn.; Albuquerque Aquarium, in New Mexico; and the Virginia Living Museum.

To be involved in the loan program, participating aquariums must be accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, have specifically designed habitats for the young turtle and follow all federal



Turtles, like this one, will be released offshore Wednesday by the N.C. Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores. (Dylan Ray photo)

guidelines for sea turtle care. After their stay at other aquariums, the turtles are brought back to North Carolina to be released into the wild.

"Collaborating with organizations like these helps spread awareness and understanding of sea turtles," said Mr. Fatzinger. "Hopefully each person who

comes in contact with these magnificent animals will be inspired to make small changes that will transform the future for this endangered species."

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Don't forget ...

Spy Sensibilities is at 10 a.m. Tuesday at Fort Macon State Park. Come out to Fort Macon and learn about the contributions women spies made during the mid 1800s.