UNC Sea Grant

April 1988

COASTWATCH

Willie Etheridge Jr.

fishing's patriarch

BY SARAH FRIDAY

ETHERIDGE

OWENS

CROCKER

Last year *Coastwatch* introduced you to three outstanding coastal Carolinians. This year we continue our tradition of honoring people who have helped shape the North Carolina coast.

In Wanchese, fisherman Willie Etheridge Jr. has earned a legendary status as a commercial fisherman and charter boat captain.

As director of the N.C. Division of Coastal Management, David Owens has achieved a reputation as one of the most progressive coastal managers in the country.

And boat dealer Kay Crocker has become the unofficial spokesman for the state's marine anglers.

It's easy to tell Willie Etheridge Jr. has been fishing all his life.

You can see it in his big, rough hands and hear it in his voice as he talks about his past 67 years.

He likes to talk about then and now. And the future. He mixes in a little religion and a lot of philosophy learned from toiling on the sea.

He talks about his family, too. How generations of Etheridges before him plied the same waters off Wanchese. And how his wife and four children pulled their weight through the years.

But most of all, Willie Etheridge Jr. likes to talk about fishing.

And for good reason.

Etheridge is one of the best known commercial fishermen and charter boat captains on the East Coast. More than 50 years on the water earned him a good living and almost legendary status in the fishing community. Even competitors admire him for his dedication, unselfish attitude, environmental bent and outspokenness.

On land, he's built an empire that includes a wholesale fish business and a seafood restaurant.

The bespectacled fisherman with the fuzzy red hair is retired now, but he hasn't slowed down.

Like one of his old trawlers, he'll be out on the water until he breaks down for good. He takes people fishing every day in the summer. And he's been fighting to have Oregon Inlet stabilized for years now.

Etheridge's penchant for hard work and persistence go back as far as his love for the water and its resources.

He likes to tell the story of the time his parents thought their little boy was lost or had run away, only to find him sleeping in a small boat in a creek beside their house.

Except for six years in the service during World War II, Etheridge stayed by that creek, making Wanchese and the waters beyond it his home.

At his parents' insistence, Etheridge attended school. But his real education came from fishing the nearby surf, rivers and sounds.

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Photo by Drew Wilson

Etheridge

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In the early 1920s, fishermen stalked species such as shad, herring and flounder, using nets and 15- to 2-foot rowboats or sailboats. Shrimp were not caught or eaten at the time. Summer meant catching spot, croaker and trout, and throwing out baited line for unsuspecting crabs.

Etheridge remembers the days before ice, when fishermen salted the fish, packed it in barrels and shipped it by boat to Elizabeth City.

There, they traded their catch for sugar, flour and other goods unavailable in Wanchese.

Ice and trucking came to Wanchese about the same time as the bridge from Manteo—the late 1920s.

The young Etheridge worked the coast with his dad, then. Together, they watched as the commercial fishing industry began to change. Sales improved, and more people were eating fish.

Fishermen quickly correlated fresh fish and profits and worked harder to meet the rising demand.

"The fresher the fish, the better it is," Etheridge says. "We have learned quality means a lot."

Because of the coast's resources, Etheridge says people in Wanchese didn't know much about the Depression. "We always had something to eat."

In 1937, with the help of President Franklin Roosevelt, Manteo got "the show." The outdoor drama, "The Lost Colony," put the region on the map.

"This place has really been growing since that day," Etheridge says. "In all this, the tourism grew just the same as our fishing improved."

The influx of vacationers gave rise to the Outer Banks' charter boat industry. After the war, Etheridge bought a boat and became a captain in 1946. He guided people to dolphin, amberjack, tuna and more for 17 years.

Summer chartering gave him the opportunity to throw out an occasional line. He even set records such as catching the first marlin off the North Carolina coast.

Docking his charter boat didn't mean slamming the brakes on Etheridge's fishing career; he just changed gears.

In 1963, he bought a trawler and fished commercially for 20 years for such species as lobster, flounder and shrimp from Massachusetts to Florida.

"I did right good in it," Etheridge admits. "I rasied a family and in a few years I started a business . . . a wholesale fish busines."

Fourteen years later, Willie R. Etheridge Seafood Co., Inc. thrives. His son operates the company, and his grandson, Willie Etheridge IV, helps out when he's home from college.

Oh, and there's a new Etheridge Seafood Restaurant down by the beach.

To Etheridge, success often meant change. He *always* shared his knowledge, and later in his career—his money.

Bobby Owens, chairman of the Dare County Board of Commissioners, attests to that.

"I would say his biggest contribution has been that he has perpetuated the seafood industry in Dare County," Owens says. "He is very astute, very knowledgeable of the sea. He makes a science out of the sea. He can almost smell the fish."

Willie III remembers his dad constantly trying new gear and fishing techniques, then sharing what he learned with other fishermen.

"Down through the years we've experimented and learned a lot," the elder Etheridge says. "We've improved our nets . . . We have learned electronics paid."

Before, fishermen concentrated on quantity—the more the better. But Etheridge taught them that fishing for species in high demand could bring them more money at the docks.

Etheridge also told others where to find the fish. And he often left

schools behind, knowing it would help the stocks.

The Wanchese fisherman's unselfish attitude is rare in such a competitive business like commercial fishing.

"A lot of fishermen don't have the attitude I do," Etheridge says. "You'll find that (competitiveness) wherever you go. I never cared much for that. It's OK in a ballgame, but when you're out there making a living I don't think it should matter.

"We were always of the attitude to help somebody," he says. "If somebody's boat got burned, the fishermen would pass the hat, then help him build another boat.

"This attitude is kind of changing with development," Etheridge laments. "People have more money, are doing things for themselves, buying things for themselves."

Despite the worries of other fishermen, Etheridge remains optimistic about the future of commercial fishing.

"Fishermen are getting along better than they ever have in my lifetime," Etheridge says. "They're working more. They're more concerned about profit."

Consumers are eating more fish, so the demand is there.

And so are the fish, Etheridge says. Untapped resources like deep ocean waters miles offshore will provide enough fish for 50 to 100 years, he says.

Etheridge just wants to make sure the fishermen from his area can get to them. He's been campaigning locally and at the state and national levels to have Oregon Inlet stabilized. A mile-long jetty would help keep the pathway to the open seas clear, he says. And it would help make his region a "national fish haven."

"The fish are there," he says. "You learn they're there."

Etheridge likens himself to Peter in the *Bible* by saying many times he'd fish on one side of the boat and not catch a thing. Then he'd try the other and catch netloads of fish.

His persistence paid.

"I always made money," he says. "I always caught fish."

David Owens

coastal caretaker

BY KATHY HART

Twenty years ago, David Owens and some Elizabeth City high school buddies drove to the Currituck beaches for a day of fishing, swimming and fun.

Not long after the group spread their blankets and rigged their lines, a man approached. He told the teenagers they were on private property. They would have to leave.

They did.

But 18-year-old Owens thought the request was unreasonable.

"It didn't seem right even then for someone to force you away from the beach," he says.

It wasn't an incident Owens forgot.

In fact, it shaped his career. Today, beach access and the public's right to use the beach are important parts of Owen's job as director of the Division of Coastal Management.

But 13 years ago, beach access was just a vague notion to Owens. He was earning a combined degree in law and regional planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when professor David Brower approached him to work on a Sea Grant project—one that involved research on the legal and planning aspects of beach ownership and access.

Owens agreed. He had seen the problem firsthand, and he was willing to do a year's worth of research and writing.

In 1981, the effort paid big dividends.

Using Brower and Owens' work, state Rep. Al Adams of Wake County and a passel of coastal legislators spurred the N.C. General Assembly to expand the Coastal Area Management Act to include a beach access program. The legislative team also passed a $1 million beach access appropriation bill.

Working with the legislators every step of the way was the young assistant director of the Division of Coastal Management—David Owens.

Today, North Carolina proudly boasts one of the best beach access programs in the nation—13 regional accessways (includes parking, restrooms and showers), 40 to 50 parking areas and hundreds of walkways.

Owens calls beach access a "fun" project, one that brought the division and the Coastal Resources Commission new respect.

Since the passage of the Coastal Area Management Act in 1974, the commission and the division had battled resistance from coastal officials and residents. Coastal folks didn't like the idea of a state commission and agency telling them what could and couldn't be done along their salty shores.

But the beach access program changed people's perceptions. They began to realize that coastal management could be beneficial and protect the resources they valued.

For Owens, beach access was a success story with a personal note of satisfaction. But there have been others.

He steered an innovative ocean-front management program through the CRC. The program, which was unpopular at the coast,

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Owens

continued

established oceanfront setbacks and banned seawalls.

"They (the CRC) decided not to sacrifice public beaches for upland development," Owens says.

And because of CRC's stand, North Carolina doesn't have to contend with vanishing beaches as in New Jersey or with the enormous beach renourishment bills of Florida.

Instead, North Carolina's oceanfront management program has been a model for coastal development in other states.

Although Owens doesn't cast a vote on the CRC, he and his staff provide the commission with the information they need to make their decisions and take their stands.

"When the CRC is confronted with a problem, they ask themselves what do we want the coast to be like in the future in respect to that problem," Owens says.

"To provide them with answers, we put together an analysis: What are the choices? What are the impacts of those choices," he says. "We tie the pieces together and provide the framework so the citizens' commission and legislators can do their work."

It's that ability to look to the future and to know what should be done that many say makes Owens so effective.

"Take the oceanfront management program, for example," says Kathy Henderson, the division's public information officer. "It started as something simple, but Dave followed it, pushed it when necessary and watched it evolve.

"It takes that kind of vision to see into the future and to know what it takes to get there," she says.

Sea Grant Director B.J. Copeland agrees.

"He's an effective leader," Copeland says. "In fact, I'd say he's the most progressive and capable coastal manager in the United States. And it's been his leadership as assistant director and director that has made the North Carolina coastal management program a model nationwide."

But what Henderson and Copeland see as foresight, Owens calls persistence and stubbornness.

"There are very few short-term problems in this business," he says. "Most of the problems we face take a long time to solve. You have to have continuity and tenacity to resolve them and make progress. And you have to be willing to take the short-term less glamorous steps to get there."

But Owens' reward is seeing results—watching the state acquire Carrot, Masonboro and Permuda islands as natural sites for preservation and "knowing that 20 years from now they'll look the same except for natural changes."

Although seeing a project come to fruition is rewarding, Owens knows that other problems loom ahead.

"There are very few permanent victories," Owens says. "There are always new developers standing at the door who don't understand the regulations or a new conservation group who doesn't know how to translate their ambitions into good works.

"Yesterday it was Masonboro Island; today, Buxton Woods; tomorrow, something else," he says.

For now, the controversy over Buxton Woods, the state's largest remaining maritime forest, is filling Owens' agenda. He's negotiating between landowners, conservationists and county government officials to determine the forest's fate.

"Sometimes I feel like Henry Kissinger with his shuttle diplomacy," Owens says. "Last week I was in Washington, D.C., to talk to federal officials. Then it was back to Manteo to talk to the county commissioners. And I ended the day on the phone with the lawyer for the landowners."

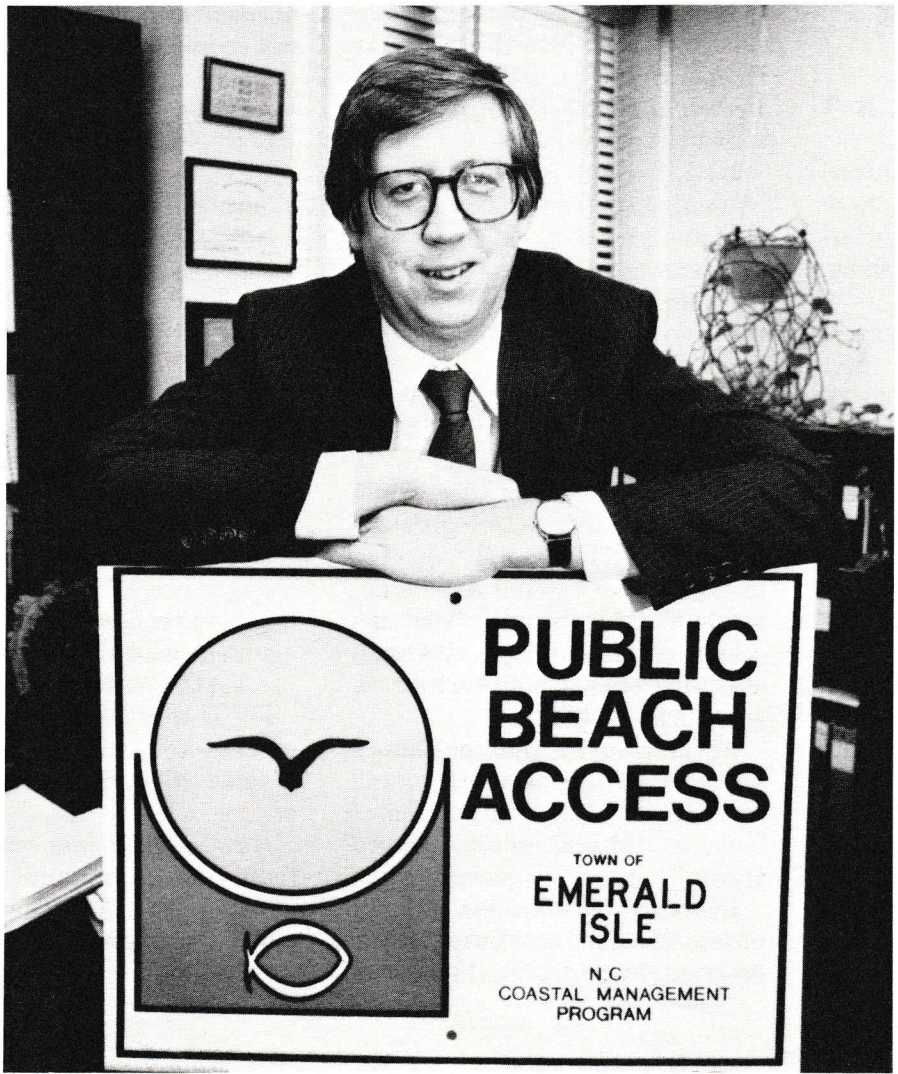

Photo by Jim Strickland

But Owens seems tireless when it comes to the job of balancing development and its economic rewards against preservation and its more subtle benefits.

"It's a lot easier to correct a problem than it is to prevent it," Owens says. "In North Carolina, we're in the fortunate position to prevent problems a lot of other states are having to correct. But it makes our job more difficult.

"It's hard for local government to swallow hard and make unpopular decisions, and it's hard for the governor and the legislature to spend dollars on coastal areas when they're faced with paving roads and educating children," he says.

But Owens says, fortunately the public reduces the pressure. He credits the state's seaside residents with a unique understanding of coastal processes.

"It's amazing how much people know and understand," he says. "They know about barrier islands and estuaries."

And Owens hopes that understanding carries to the future as the CRC and the division face some of the problems ahead—post-hurricane rebuilding standards, estuarine standards and the continued acquisition of beach access and natural areas.

But whatever the future holds, Owens hopes resource managers take some cues from the past.

"When I was 12 years old, it was easy to find places to play in the marsh mud," he says. "There were no condos or parking lots. I hope 50 years from now children have that same opportunity."

Kay Crocker

anglers' advocate

BY NANCY DAVIS

The customer gazed longingly at the shiny hull.

You could tell by the look in his eyes. He wanted that 27-foot Boston Whaler. He could see himself at the helm, feel his hands on the wheel and smell the salty air.

But boat dealer Kay Crocker woke the shopper from his dream.

"I'll be glad to wrap it up for you," he joked.

Crocker was peddling some of his finest vessels at a boat show in Raleigh recently. And his soft-sell approach was charming his customers.

He might not make the sale this time, but this man would be back.

As owner of Crocker's Marine in Wrightsville Beach, Kay Crocker is one of the leading boat salesmen on the North Carolina coast. And more importantly, he owns the franchise to two of the top sellers in the recreational boat industry—Boston Whaler and Grady White.

But Crocker's reputation is built on more than his salesmanship.

His easygoing manner and knowledge of the recreational fishing industry have earned him a job as an unofficial spokesman for anglers in the state.

And recreational fishermen are glad to have him on their side.

"He's as honest as the day is long," says Eddie Smith, owner of Grady White Boats in Greenville. "Kay is hard-working, has lots of integrity. And in terms of recreational fishing, he's one of the greatest spokesmen in the state. He's genuinely interested in protecting the fishery, and not just the recreational fishery."

When Crocker isn't minding his store, he's attending public hearings, urging new regulations for the fisheries, and lobbying the legislature—all at his own expense.

In his blue oxford shirt, belt with fish on it and leather topsiders, Crocker has the look of a recreational fisherman. And his booming radio voice is tailor-made for speaking his mind about recreational fishing.

"Man has a way of being a damn glutton," he says. "He'll catch all he can, and take it home and not use it."

Crocker's way with words has a way of making folks listen.

Sea Grant Director B.J. Copeland has watched Crocker in action at N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission hearings.

"Kay Crocker has spoken eloquently about those resources and how we need to protect them for all of us. He usually gives a balanced view and therefore maintains his credibility," Copeland says. "He does his homework, formulates a conclusion and delivers it very expressively."

And Crocker genuinely believes in his message. To prove it, in 1982 he helped found the Wrightsville Beach King Mackerel Tournament.

The proceeds of the tournament fund artificial reefs in the southeastern part of the state. So far, tournament profits have helped create reefs out of two tugboats, a barge and a dredge.

Crocker hasn't always been anchored in coastal Carolina. He grew up on a tobacco farm in Selma, N.C. After he graduated with a degree in history from Wake Forest University in 1962, he moved to Wilmington to be near the water.

He taught high school social studies for five years, but his ambitions changed the day one of his former employers took him charter boat fishing.

He was hooked. Pretty soon, he was running his own charter on weekends in a 36-foot Harkers Island-built wooden boat.

In those days, Crocker says, "You could take a four-hour trip out of Wrightsville Beach and catch 50 to 60 Spanish mackerel. Now the stock has been so devastated, you could

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Photo by Julie Macie

Crocker

continued

fish all summer and not catch that many."

By 1967, the urge to be on the water was too strong to ignore. He gave up teaching to become the captain of a 54-foot private motor yacht. He guided the boat to Florida for the winter and North for the summers.

Three years later, Crocker decided it was time to settle down. He returned to Wrightsville Beach, got married and started a boating business.

"Being dumb and foolish, I didn't even realize there was a recession going on. I had $600 in the bank. We lived off my wife's salary. It was four or five years before I ever drew a salary," he says.

But Crocker was a hard worker. Before long, he had obtained the Grady White franchise for southeastern North Carolina. Today it is one of the most lucrative small-boat franchises.

His one-man operation has grown to one with 15 employees, and he also owns an interest in a Morehead City boat store.

In his 20 years in business, Crocker has watched the recreational fishing industry change.

Most folks weren't prosperous enough in the 60s to own their own boats. But now, small boats are affordable to a lot of people, Crocker says.

"That's caused a lot more pressure on the fishing resource, but it's not an unrealistic pressure," he says.

As a spokesman for the industry, Crocker's opinions have a recreational bias, but he's always open to compromise. Conserving the fisheries is the most important consideration, he says.

"Government regulatory agencies have got to enact rules and regulations that conserve not only for recreational but for commercial fishermen too. And what's good for one is good for the other. But they may not be regulations we all want," Crocker says.

"One of my major concerns in recreational fishing is, through whatever means, we've got to conserve this resource for our children and grandchildren and future generations. And I'm talking about recreational and commercial. It doesn't make any difference," Crocker says.

Even so, Crocker feels commercial fishermen have an advantage when it comes to management decisions. "We know how many commercial fishermen there are because they buy a license. And they sell their harvest, so there's a dollar value on the industry," he says.

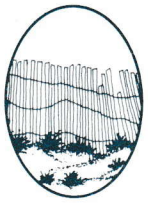
But Crocker says he often feels handicapped by a lack of quantitative information about the recreational fishing industry. Despite the widespread economic impact of recreational fishing, statistics on saltwater anglers are hard to come by.

"The legislature and other regulatory bodies have no indications of the value of recreational fishermen to North Carolina," Crocker says.

But he adds that the sheer numbers of the sportsmen are beginning to make legislators and policymakers take notice.

THE BACK PAGE

"The Back Page" is an update on Sea Grant activities — on research, marine education and advisory services. It's also a good place to find out about meetings, workshops and new publications. For more information on any of the projects described, contact the Sea Grant offices in Raleigh (919/737-2454). For copies of publications, write UNC Sea Grant, NCSU, Box 8605, Raleigh, N.C. 27695-8605.



The ad reads: BEACH HOUSE FOR SALE. Your eyebrows rise, your pulse quickens, and you read on. BRAND NEW TWO-STORY WITH A DECK AND GARAGE. ON THE OCEANFRONT.

Before you turn your daydream into reality, pick up a copy of *Your Place at the Beach: A Buyer's Guide to Vacation Real Estate.*

The attractive, 28-page booklet published by Sea Grant and the N.C. Real Estate Commission offers a thorough look at the fun and frustrations of owning coastal property.

Written by Walter Clark, Sea Grant's coastal law specialist, the booklet addresses the environmental hazards, ownership options and costs associated with coastal real estate. And it can help you know what questions to ask sellers, real estate agents, government personnel and attorneys.

Whether you want to buy a vacant lot, townhouse, condominium, cottage or time share, *Your Place at the Beach* can help you make informed decisions.

For a copy, write Sea Grant and ask for publication number UNC-SG-87-04. The cost is $2.50.

In the summer of 1983, an extensive blue-green algal bloom spread across the lower part of North Carolina's Neuse River. To learn more about the bloom and its causes, Sea Grant studied the factors that supported and sustained the algae's growth.

Researchers Robert Christian, Donald Stanley and Deborah Daniel, all of East Carolina University, examined how chlorophyll, nitrogen, phosphorus and carbon concentrations affected the bloom.

Their findings are published in the new Sea Grant working paper *Characteristics of a Blue-Green Algal Bloom in the Neuse River, North Carolina.*

For a copy, write Sea Grant and ask for UNC-SG-WP-87-2. The cost is $3.

In coastal North Carolina, spring isn't the only thing busting out all over. In late April and May, blue crabs also bust out of their winter shells. And for a few hours after the molt, the blue crab remains in a highly valued softened state.

To cash in on the crabs' increased value, many fishermen capture the premolt crabs and hold them until they shed their shells. The crabs can be shed in anything from a floating tray in the sound to an elaborate onshore shedding system.

And now Sea Grant agent Wayne Wescott has learned that crabs can be shed in well water. The use of well water eliminates water quality problems and the need for waterfront property.

To learn more about the well-water shedding system, send for Sea Grant's latest Blueprint, *Shedding Soft Crabs in a Closed Well-Water System.* The Blueprint describes how to build and set up the system.

Ask for Blueprint UNC-SG-BP-88-1. It's free.

If you'd like to know more about shedding crabs, everything from identifying peelers to marketing soft crabs, send for Sea Grant's *A Guide to Soft Shell Crabbing.* Written by Wescott, the 32-page illustrated booket describes harvesting methods, handling procedures and shedding systems.

For a copy, write Sea Grant. Ask for UNC-SG-84-01. The cost is $3.

When it comes to talking about their boats, most people go overboard.

But when maintenance is the topic, boaters often fall short.

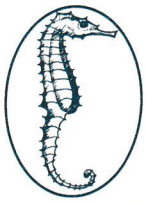
Proper year-round upkeep of boats, motors, trailers and other gear keeps equipment in good working condition and minimizes costly repairs.

This time of year, it takes special measures to de-winterize boats and ready them for the water.

Bob Hines, Sea Grant marine advisory agent at Pine Knoll Shores, has a few tips for checking boats.

Recharge the battery and clean the cables and connectors. Empty the old gasoline from the boat's tank and put in fresh gasoline. Check the boat's wiring for corrosion. Replace any bad terminals. Inspect and replace spark plugs. Wash and wax the boat. And make sure enough life preservers are onboard.

For a more extensive list, write Sea Grant for Hine's free Blueprint *Boat and Gear Preventative Maintenance.* Ask for UNC-SG-BP-81-7.



Lundie Spence is part travel agent and part salesman. Several times a year, Sea Grant's marine education specialist arranges exciting workshops to sell teachers on coastal ecology and biology.

This summer, Spence has two workshops on her calendar — one in Bogue Banks, N.C., and another in Puerto Rico.

In Bogue Banks, teachers will use a new curriculum developed by Spence and other specialists to focus on coastal environments. Activities incorporate physics, chemistry, biology and physical science. They are geared toward high school students.

The workshop, scheduled for July 24 to 30, is a joint program with Sea Grant, the N.C. Math and Science Center, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In Puerto Rico, 20 North Carolina teachers and 20 island teachers will investigate tropical coral reefs, mangrove systems, rain forests and marine grass flats from June 18 to 25. Aug. 13 to 16, the Puerto Rican teachers will travel north to Swansboro, N.C., to

Continued on next page

study similar ecosystems in our temperate climate.

Spence organized this program with educators from the Math and Science Center and UNC at Charlotte.

Funding for each workshop has been provided by Title II of the Education for Economic Security Act through the N.C. Math and Science Education Network.

For more information, write Spence at Sea Grant. Or call 919/737-2454.

Coastwatch is published monthly except July and December by the University of North Carolina Sea Grant College Program, 105 1911 Building, Box 8605, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C. 27695-8605. Vol. 15, No. 4, April 1988. Dr. B.J. Copeland, director. Kathy Hart, editor. Nancy Davis and Sarah Friday, staff writers.

Coastwatch is a free newsletter. If you'd like to be added to the mailing list, fill out this form and send it to Sea Grant, Box 8605, NCSU, Raleigh, N.C. 27695-8605.

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