

WATER

ACCESS

State panel gets sobering figures on dwindling resources

BY BEN HOGWOOD
NEWS-TIMES

PINE KNOLL SHORES

— The state is losing its fish houses, public marinas and public access to the water, but a state-formed committee is examining ways to make sure the public trust waters are not only available to those who can afford waterfront property.

The Waterfront Access Study Committee, formed by the General Assembly, discussed the problem and possible solutions Monday when it met in the Soundside Room at the N.C. Aquarium in Pine Knoll Shores.

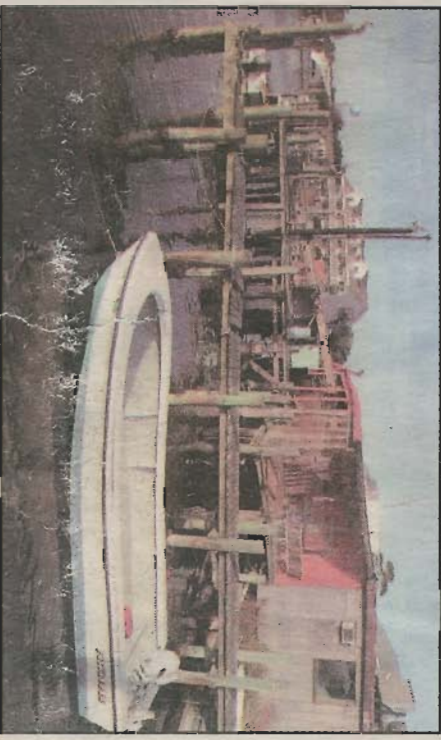
Dr. Barbara Garrity-Blake, a cultural anthropologist and one of four county representatives on the board, gave a presentation outlaying the impact the changing coast has had, particularly on fishermen and fishing communities.

She gave the presentation with Barry Nash, of N.C. Sea Grant.

The two conducted a three-month study that revealed **See Access / Page 5A**



David Hilton, left, and Hardy Plyler sort fish at the Ocracoke fish house. Fishermen in the area formed an organization recently to raise money to purchase the business, which supports the commercial fishing industry in the small coastal



Working waterfronts, like this one in Ocracoke where fishermen are trying to save the last fish house in that community, are dwindling with increasing development pressures. (Dylan Ray photo)

village. The group will be on hand during Waterfowl Weekend, Dec. 1-3, at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center, to discuss their efforts. A state committee examined the problem Monday. (Dylan Ray photo)

Ocracoke fishermen rally to save business

BY SHANNON KEMP
NEWS-TIMES

OCRACOKE — Fishing is more than a sport. It's more than a sunny day activity during the weekend.

For some, it's a livelihood — a way of life and living tradition passed down from generation to generation as they carry on the trade of their grandfathers. A group of Ocracoke fish-

ermen are keeping that tradition alive, and offer a valuable lesson for Carteret and other coastal fishermen on the benefit of teamwork and the importance of working waterfronts. To the fishermen and women of Ocracoke, fishing is not a dying occupation. There are still those who live the tradition every day, but it is becoming **See Ocracoke / Page 5A**

Ocracoke

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harder and harder for them to maintain their way of life.

With only one remaining fish house on the island, local fishermen and the community have come together to save their working waterfront.

Local watermen formed the Ocracoke Working Watermen Association (OWWA) in an effort to buy the lease and business of the fish house from the current owner.

Now, the Ocracoke Seafood Company is operating out of what was previously known as the South Point Market.

The fishermen have been buying and selling both retail and wholesale fish through the market, with no middleman collecting any of the profit. They are able to do it all right there.

Mike L. Johnson, owner of the fish house when it was known as South Point Market, had hoped by selling the fish house to the local watermen their livelihood could be saved and has given the OWWA 12 months to come up with the money to purchase the business.

"But how to pull it all together, get the funding?" organizer Robin Payne asks in a June 26 paper, *A Race to Find Funding*.

"It will take \$477,000 to pur-

chase the business, make repairs, purchase a refrigeration truck and cover salaries, insurance, licenses etc. — basically to get the business up and running for the first year," Mrs. Payne said.

"After that is paid, the business will be able to sustain itself," she said.

The fish house owner sees the importance of keeping the fish house going.

"It's the best in the long run," Mr. Johnson said. "It's not about me or any individual, and it's best for the village of Ocracoke to perpetuate the Ocracoke fish house."

And it's not just about fishing either.

Not only will the fishermen of the island have a place to get ice for their fish, a place to package, ship and work out of, but also the heart of the community will continue to beat.

"Without the fishermen, Ocracoke loses not only a deep history of maritime culture but it loses the flavor," Mrs. Payne said.

"Visitors come every year and if they are driving around and don't see the floats and buoys and nets being mended you lose (what they came down here for)," she said.

Tourists and visitors come to Ocracoke to escape the 9 to 5 business world of white-walled cubicles and computer screens,

to visit a community where seafood restaurants are served the local catch that day — caught that day.

And the community, fighting harder to save the fish house than a bluefish running the line, is completely behind the fishermen who want to purchase it.

A fish fry and bake sale has raised more than \$4,000 toward the cause and this winter the music and storytelling group wants to have an event to raise funds, as well, Mrs. Payne said.

East Carolina Bank on Ocracoke has also set up an account to receive donations for the fish house.

Even local artisans have gotten involved with an art event raising more than \$4,000 for the cause.

Barbara Hardy Ray, owner of Secret Garden Gallery, who spearheaded the art event, said a call for entries was sent out for the public to make postcards, which were sold for \$5 and \$10 each as a donation for the fish house.

The gallery mailed out a couple hundred invitations and received about 350 entries, Mrs. Hardy Ray said.

Everyone from local school kids to everyday Joe's to even some professional artists participated and made postcards for the event, the gallery owner said.

"People from other states who

love Ocracoke even sent entries," Mrs. Ray said.

Those who did not make postcards sent other items and the gallery had an auction, as well.

All the money went to the fish house, Mrs. Ray said, which benefits everybody.

The community could lose local seafood, local fishermen wouldn't have a place to base their operation and Ocracoke could lose a way of life, she said.

But, "so many participated in the art event and it really drew the community together for a good cause," Mrs. Ray said.

And the fish house is a good cause for educational purposes, too.

Securing the maritime culture will keep the locals down here, Mrs. Payne said.

Sons who come to work with their fathers can learn how to fish and have that option of making it a part-time or full-time living, she said.

School groups who come to the island learn about the way of life. They go out with the fishermen, hear lectures and participate in hands-on activities regarding oyster restoration, spawning habits of different kinds of fish, clean water and how many gallons of water a clam filters.

Efforts for the future will include a larger space on the harbor for visitors to come and

have hands-on experiences, Mrs. Payne said.

But there's still a long way to go, and the closing date to transfer title is looming. It's set for May 30, 2007.

If the fundraising effort comes up short, the business goes back to Mr. Johnson.

And if the business closes down, there's no land left on the harbor to purchase for a fish house, and there's no more public access "because everything is privately owned," Mrs. Payne said.

"If they can hold on to this, there will be some hope they can do this," Mrs. Payne said.

"Surely there must be some assistance for them (the fishermen)," said Alton Ballance, Ocracoke native, author, teacher and past Hyde County Commissioner.

He suggested grants, government help, tax breaks and even kind-hearted donations, such as those of the community.

He felt that the local fishermen have challenging times ahead of them. But with changes and help, there was certainly a chance for them to make it through.

Ocracoke Seafood Company will be at the Waterfowl Weekend Dec. 1-3 to educate others about the plight of their fishermen.