

Island tries to save last fish house

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News & Observer

Published: Sun, Apr. 15, 2007 12:00AM

OCRACOKE -- Blackbeard is a colorful Ocracoke legend, but the dwindling crew of commercial fishermen who still ply the waters off this Outer Banks village don't want to become another.

They're being pushed into the past by government regulations, pollution, declining harvests and rising costs. Now they face their biggest challenge -- saving the place where they bring their catch, the last fish house in Ocracoke.

The fish house is operated by a salty mix of crab potters, pound netters and charter boat operators. They formed a communal company last year after the last commercial fish house operator pulled out in 2005. But the group must raise \$325,000 by June to continue the lease.

"It's not just good for the fishermen, it's good for Ocracoke, for the tourists. If we lose this one, that's it," said Ronnie O'Neal, an Ocracoke native who was unloading blue crabs on the dock last week.

In addition to the \$325,000 for the lease, the group is seeking \$175,000 for renovations and equipment and about \$36,000 for other expenses.

Supporters have raised about \$62,000 through donations, with bake sales, fish fries and oyster roasts.

The state legislature is reviewing legislation that would appropriate \$500,000 to renovate and expand the fish house.

O'Neal, 55, said there were at least 50 fishermen working crab pots or traps in the waters around Ocracoke when he started in the early 1970s. Now there are five or six.

Fish houses, where catches are unloaded, cleaned or iced down and then distributed for sale, are disappearing along the coast as waterfront property is sold and converted to restaurants and residential property. An N.C. Sea Grant study in 2006 found that 39 fish houses closed in the previous six years -- a loss of 33 percent -- and 78 were still operating.

One year to pay

When the owner of Ocracoke's last commercial fish house quit the business last year, he gave the fishermen a year to pay for a long-term lease on the facility so they could keep it alive.

The fishermen formed the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, which works with The Ocracoke Foundation, a community nonprofit organization. The watermen's group operates the Ocracoke Seafood Co. in the former location of South Point Seafood on Silver Lake Harbor on the south end of the island.

Additional fishermen and other non-watermen have since joined the effort to keep the fish house and seafood company going, said Robin Payne, an Ocracoke resident who helped organize the association. She said the business eventually would be self-sustaining, but fishermen did not have the money needed to buy the lease and make needed renovations.

In many communities, the weathered docks at fish houses provided access to public waters for those who did not own waterfront property. Although Ocracoke Island is relatively remote and part of Cape Hatteras National Seashore, the village enclave of about 800 full-time residents has not escaped the development pressure and gentrification that has altered other parts of the coast. There are no oceanfront houses because the beach is part of the seashore, but condos and houses away from the water are priced at more than \$600,000.

Payne and her husband, Thomas, moved to Ocracoke from Northern Virginia about four years ago after he retired from the construction business. Like many who answer phones, wait on customers and work on the dock, they are volunteers.

For fishing, tourism

Payne said she agreed to help because the fish house is important to the community. Not only does it benefit fishermen, she said, but it provides fresh seafood to restaurants and tourists.

Routine fish house chores such as sorting and packing fish and shellfish in ice are attractions to tourists who often stroll through the open doors.

"Yesterday people were lined up taking pictures," Payne said in an interview at the fish house office.

A working fish house is not fancy. Huge freezers spit out ice that is packed in cardboard boxes with fresh products or carried on boats by fishermen. A cutting room, office area and storage areas open into a common area with a concrete floor.

A bumper sticker stuck to the white wall expresses a common sentiment: "Friends don't let friends eat imported shrimp."

In the retail portion, a small area with two display cases, Patty Plyler, wife of an association member, waited on a steady stream of customers who came in for flounder, shrimp, trout and live crabs that came off O'Neal's boat that morning.

Plyler doubles as an educator, using a model of a net to show customers how a common net catches fish by leading them into a heart-shaped section that funnels them into a square portion at the end. That section, the pound, gives the net its name.

"It's fascinating," she said. "The kids want to know how it [pound net] works."

Her husband, Hardy Plyler, a commercial fisherman for 33 years, said making the public aware of the industry is a major goal of the association. He hopes it will be a model for other communities struggling to keep a working waterfront.

"We've got a future if we can fish," he said.