

Hatteras school's hatchery project is finding success

By JESSICA H. HORBACH

Fifty-three fish have already had quite an academic career, and they're just getting started.

The black sea bass began their lives at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, where they were spawned.

They were raised at North Carolina State University and now have come east to their new home, Cape Hatteras Secondary School of Coastal Studies.

The fish, donated to the school by North Carolina Sea Grant, arrived January 3 on Hatteras Island, the first day students were back to school after the holidays.

Cape Hatteras science teacher Tracy Shisler, alternative school teacher Amber Bradshaw and several of their students anxiously waited for the new arrivals with John McCord, education programs coordinator at the University of North Carolina's Coastal Studies Institute (CSI) in Manteo.

McCord travels to Cape Hatteras to teach in Shisler's class once every two weeks and oversee the hatchery.

This semester, said McCord,

"most of our time will be taken up by the hatchery . . . there's things for the students to do everyday."

For the next several months, Cape Hatteras' sixth and seventh graders in Shisler's class and Bradshaw's students will be looking out for the little guys.

They will check the hatchery-water's salinity and pH while the black sea bass are swimming around in the two 180-gallon tanks in Shisler's classroom.

Those tanks were purchased thanks to grants from Dominion Power, Cape Hatteras Electric Cooperative's Bright Ideas and the Dare Education Foundation.

"Without those three grants, we wouldn't have been able to do this," Shisler said.

As she looked out the window with a crowd of anxious students awaiting the new arrivals,

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Shisler commented, "This is like waiting for somebody's new born baby."

Everyone watched as Sea Grant's aquaculture and blue crab specialist Marc Turano pulled up in a van. He had brought the fish in a white cooler from Raleigh to the island.

"We've been working up to this," McCord said.

Turano unloaded the fish with the help of alternative school eleventh grader Eugene Clinton.

While the black sea bass are staying with the students, they will be "aggressively feed" so they grow quickly, said McCord. All that eating will get the fish ready to be tagged and released before the summer break.

But the learning won't stop there.

When anglers reel in one of the classes' black sea bass, they'll be able to pass on information to the students about the fish — like where it was caught and how much it weighed. McCord said he hopes to work out some of the data collection details with the state Division of Marine Fisheries.

As Turano opened the cooler, now safely in Shisler's classroom, everyone gathered around the to take a look at the newcomers. But not everyone was as thrilled as the students were to see the finger-length black sea bass.

Turano assured the students that the mummichogs swimming around the hatchery's tanks would be eaten by their new neighbors. Students caught these tiny fish last semester and used them to prepare the tanks for the black sea bass.

Their death will not be the first fish fatalities the students have seen.

"I've seen a lot of fish pass," said Clinton.

Shortly before Thanksgiving, the school lost power, said Shisler. When she came in to check on the mummichogs, she found them dead.

"It smelled like a fish house," the science teacher said. "We kind of started again."

Now it's been nearly two weeks since the sea bass first arrived and things are going well, Shisler said on Tuesday.

The fish have already grown some.

"They're eating quite well," said the science teacher.

Whatever the final outcome may be, the students are enthusiastic about this project.

During the holiday break, Clinton, who is working on a video about the project, and Hodges came to check on the mummichogs.

Once, Hodges brought her sister along. "She was very dedicated," Shisler said of Hodges,

who even came in on Christmas Eve.

And the fun of hands-on science won't end with black sea bass.

Last year, the students took care of oyster larvae. Using a method called "strip spawning" — when an oyster is striped of an egg and fertilized under a microscope — the students were able to see a baby oyster made.

"It was like the most amazing thing," said Shisler.

The class had hoped to raise and later release the larvae, but not many of the baby oysters survived. Nonetheless, the effort was a hit.

This year, the students will try again.

They will try "temperature shock spawning" — a method that doesn't kill the adult oysters, but instead shocks them into releasing eggs and sperm into the water. The plan is to raise larvae for about three weeks and then place them in their natural habitat in nearby waters.

McCord hopes to end this project with around 150,000 - 175,000 larvae, or about 15 to 20 bushels, ready for release.

The red drum or striped bass larvae the students will also be rearing are expected to arrive within the next few weeks, Shisler said. These fish will be under the students' care until they are about finger-length size and ready for release.

All of these hands-on projects are teaching students about the waters that surround their island.

McCord said this will help the students learn to be good stewards of the "delicate" ecosys-

tem.

But the project has become more about more than the students.

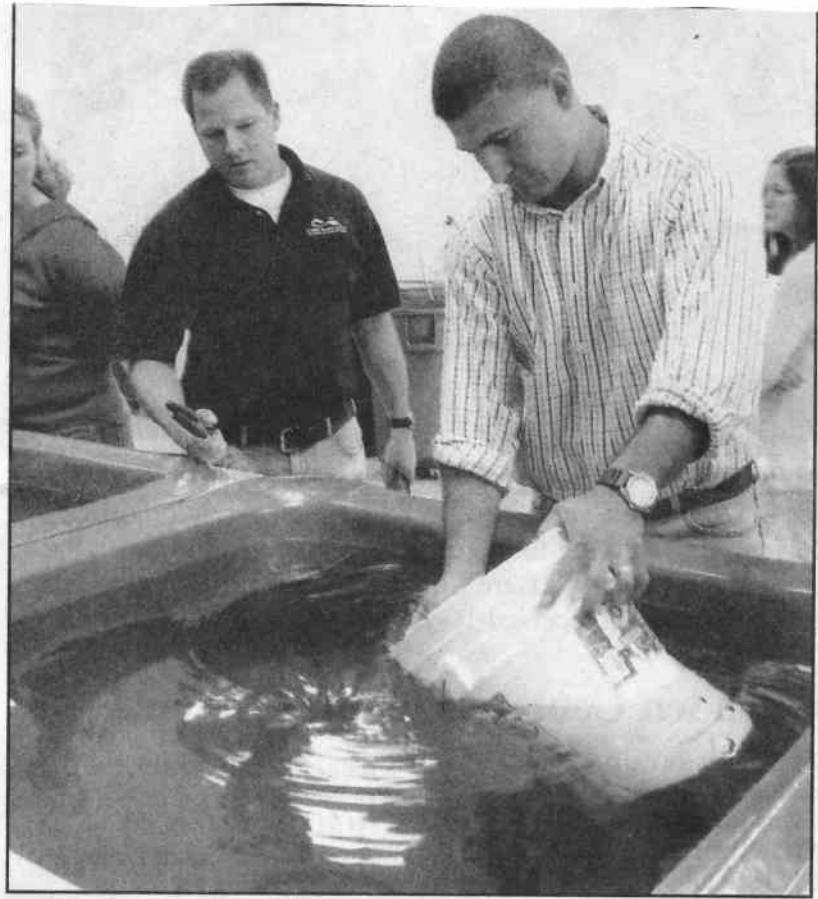
Many of the students' families have gotten involved.

"We get a lot of support," said Shisler. "It's amazing how the parents have rallied around this."

One parent is working on developing a back-up battery to keep the hatchery pumps going, so another Thanksgiving tragedy doesn't occur.

Another parent donated a 40-gallon tank.

Shisler said there were too many parents involved to begin to name them all.



MARC TURANO (right), North Carolina Sea Grant's aquaculture and blue crab specialist, released several black sea bass into a hatchery at Cape Hatteras Secondary School. John McCord, UNC Coastal Studies Institute education programs coordinator, looked on as the fish were being released. (J. H. Horbach photo)