COASTAL HABITAT PROTECTION PLAN PROGRAM

2002 - 2003
ANNUAL REPORT

TO THE

JOINT LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION ON SEAFOOD AND AQUACULTURE

AND

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW COMMISSION

OF THE

NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

FROM

NORTH CAROLINA MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION,
NORTH CAROLINA COASTAL RESOURCES COMMISSION, AND
NORTH CAROLINA ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

September 2003
SUMMARY

September 2002 – August 2003 Actions

- All six of the plan’s basic habitat chapters are drafted; they are in various stages of technical review and revision.
- The Intercommission Review Committee is taking a very active role in the process, reviewing each habitat chapter and developing the draft management options.
- Staff of the divisions of Marine Fisheries and Coastal Management began detailed presentations on each of the six types of fish habitats to the Marine Fisheries and Coastal Resources commissions in January 2003.
- The public outreach process is underway; including an enhanced web site, an informational video, a brochure, a tabloid inserted in coastal newspapers, and a series of public information meetings during July – September 2003.
- The North Carolina General Assembly approved an extension of the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan deadline to 31 December 2004.
- Members of the Coastal Resources, Marine Fisheries, and Environmental Management commissions met together in October 2002 at the North Carolina Aquarium at Ft. Fisher to share information about the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan and to visit nearby coastal habitats.
- Elizabeth City State University has implemented a federal grant to establish a remote sensing program, partly to support the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan Program. Mapping of sea grass in the Albemarle Sound system is underway.

September 2003 – August 2005 Planned Actions

- Complete informational presentations on the six types of fish habitats to the Marine Fisheries and Coastal Resources commissions in Winter 2004.
- IRC complete development of initial management options during Spring 2004.
- Continue the public outreach effort on the draft North Carolina Coastal Habitat Protection Plan during Summer 2004
- Submit the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan to Commissions for adoption in Fall 2004.
- Begin development of management unit (watershed) plans in early 2005.
Introduction

Fisheries Reform Act

The North Carolina General Assembly established the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan program within the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources with passage of the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997. The Act (General Statute 143B-279.8) requires preparation of Coastal Habitat Protection Plans (CHPPs) for critical fisheries habitats in the coastal area. The Act states “[t]he goal of the Plans shall be the long-term enhancement of coastal fisheries associated with each coastal habitat.” The Divisions of the Marine Fisheries, Water Quality, and Coastal Management are designated as the lead agencies for the program. The plans will:

1. Describe fisheries habitats and their biological systems;
2. Evaluate the functions, fisheries values, status, and trends in the habitats;
3. Identify existing and potential threats to the habitats and impacts on coastal fishing; and
4. Recommend actions to protect and restore the habitats.

Role of the Commissions

The Coastal Resources, Environmental Management, and Marine Fisheries commissions must each adopt the plans for them to become effective. Once the plans are approved, rule making and policy actions taken by all three commissions, are to comply, “to the maximum extent practicable” with the plans.

The three commissions are to report by 1 September each year to the Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture and the Environmental Review Commission on progress in developing and implementing the plans. This document reports on progress made on Coastal Habitat Protection Plans during September 2002 – August 2003.

Recent Progress

North Carolina Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (NC CHPP)

The first draft of this document was sent out for initial Department review in January 2002. Due to the broad scope of the document, the complexity of the issues, and comments received on the draft, DENR staff realized that extensive restructuring, revisions, and additional coordination would be required to finalize the North Carolina Coastal Habitat Protection Plan.

The document has been reorganized to simplify the basic approach to discussion of fish habitats and threats to their productivity, while adhering to guidance provided in G.S. 143B-279.8. Accordingly, the plan is based on six basic types of fishery habitat: the water column, shell bottom, submerged aquatic vegetation, wetlands, soft bottoms, and ocean hard bottom. A chapter is devoted to each type. Each of the habitat chapters is organized to provide the information specified in the Act:

- Description and distribution of the habitat,
- Ecological role and function,
- Status and trends,
• Threats, and
• Recommended management actions to deal with the threats.

The NC CHPP will describe the function of habitats necessary for production of important fish stocks and the links between those habitats and various life history stages of the fish. The NC CHPP will also describe the various types of threats to the habitats upon which productive fisheries depend. The plan will also summarize the institutional structures for management of fisheries habitat, water quality, and fisheries in eastern North Carolina. Finally, the Plan will include management recommendations for the three regulatory commissions, DCM, DWQ, and DMF to implement in order to address the identified threats.

In support of this revised approach, the Intercommission Review Committee (IRC), composed of two members each from the Environmental Management, Coastal Resources, and Marine Fisheries commissions, is taking a more active role in the process. Specifically, members of the IRC are meeting every other month with technical staff from DENR divisions and the Wildlife Resources Commission (CHPP Development Team) to review each chapter in detail and to develop draft management options. This process should be completed by April 2004.

Attachment 1 lists the members of the IRC.

Attachment 2 shows the major milestones anticipated for development of the NC CHPP.

Meetings and Products

The CHPP Development Team, including staff from the divisions of Marine Fisheries, Coastal Management, Water Quality, Environmental Health (Shellfish Sanitation and Recreational Water Quality Section), and the Wildlife Resources Commission assisted DMF staff with writing and review of each chapter of the CHPP. The Development Team met four times with the IRC to review individual chapters and develop initial management options. Progress reports have been provided to all three commissions, the Intercommission Review Committee, and senior DENR staff.

Numerous presentations were made by DMF staff and Team members at various meetings addressing coastal issues. Sponsors of those meetings included the Coastal Resources Advisory Council, North Carolina Coastal Federation, Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program Coordinating Council, and several local civic organizations. The CHPP poster was displayed at several public events, such as the “One North Carolina Naturally” conference in Raleigh (April 2003). Technical presentations were made at the Coastal GeoTools Conference in Charleston, S.C. and at the American Fisheries Society Southern Division meeting in Wilmington, N.C. The Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management invited a CHPP Team member to Boston to explain the North Carolina program to assist them undertake a similar initiative.

Public Outreach

Using federal grant funds, the Department began a public outreach program. This activity included a four-part effort:
• An informational video describing the NC CHPP and inviting viewers to participate in the process (March – April 2003).
  o Over 200 copies of the video were distributed to local cable TV systems, educational groups, individual members of the Marine Fisheries and Coastal Resources commissions, members of the Coastal Resources Advisory Council, the North Carolina Ferry Division, the North Carolina Aquariums, the Estuarian, and other groups and individuals for public showing.
• An informational brochure that described the six types of coastal fish habitats and invited readers to participate in the process (May – June 2003).
  o About 15,000 copies of the brochures were distributed similarly to the video.
• A 12-page newspaper tabloid further describing the six types of fish habitat and threats to them was printed and inserted in coastal newspapers. The insert also invited readers to participate in the process, and listed the dates and locations for ten public meetings later in the year (June 2003).
  o About 250,000 copies of the insert were distributed via local coastal newspapers. Several thousand additional copies were mailed to interested persons and groups.
• Ten public meetings were convened throughout the coastal area, as well as inland as far west as Mooresville.
  o Participants provided comments on threats to the fish habitats and suggested potential management actions to address the threats.

Future Actions

North Carolina Coastal Habitat Protection Plan Development

Through the end of calendar year 2004 staff will concentrate on preparation of the NC CHPP to address threats facing coastal fisheries habitats throughout eastern North Carolina. It is being prepared using a wide variety of information sources including wetlands maps from the Division of Coastal Management; data on distribution of submerged aquatic vegetation from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, DMF, and DWQ; and data on topics as diverse as soil types, agricultural and forestry acreage, point source discharges, Natural Heritage sites, and recreational and commercial fisheries landings.

Plan Adoption

The process of working with the three commissions to lay the basis for consideration and adoption of the NC CHPP began in October 2002, with a tri-commission meeting, consisting of presentations and local field trips. DENR Secretary Ross addressed the commissions and discussed the NC CHPP with commissioners in a workshop setting. The meeting emphasized the importance of the CHPPs Program and began the process of developing a strategy for adoption and implementation of the plans. The divisions are presenting information from draft chapters of the NC CHPP to the commissions over several meetings in order to allow time for consideration of the plan in phases rather than all at once. This process began in January 2003 and will end during February – March 2004.

Management Unit Plans

Early in 2005 work will begin on development of the plans that will cover 11 specific geographic areas similar to the Division of Water Quality's river basins (see Attachment 3). These areas are referred to as Management Units, and the plans will provide more area-specific information and recommendations. It will take approximately 12 - 18 months to complete each Management Unit Plan. These documents will focus on identification and improved management of site-specific habitat areas.
Other Accomplishments and Issues

With assistance from the divisions of Coastal Management and Marine Fisheries, Elizabeth City State University received a grant to establish a remote sensing program and laboratory. Much of the justification for the grant was based on the need to obtain and analyze satellite data to aid in preparation of the NC CHPP and management unit documents. Under this program, staff initiated mapping of sea grass beds in the Albemarle Sound system late in 2002. This work is being expanded during 2003 – 04.

The 2001 - 2002 Annual Report noted several impediments to success of the CHPP Program. As in previous years, insufficient funding has prevented obtaining the following items that would greatly enhance the development of the NC CHPP:

- Dedicated environmental scientists (one each in DWQ, DCM, and DMF) to support work on CHPPs,
- Funds to subscribe to electronic scientific literature databases at DMF offices in Wilmington and Morehead City, and
- Funds to hire graduate students to assist in locating data and reports, either directly or through contracts with laboratories in Wilmington and Morehead City-Beaufort.

ATTACHMENT 1.

INTERCOMMISSION REVIEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS
2002 - 2003

MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

Dr. Barbara Garrity-Blake
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Pittsboro
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ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

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ATTACHMENT 2.

TIMELINE FOR NC COASTAL HABITAT PROTECTION PLANS
JULY 2003 – December 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Draft NC CHPP</td>
<td>July – December 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public outreach activities</td>
<td>July – December 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRC review CHPP drafts</td>
<td>July 2003 – April 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRC develop draft management options</td>
<td>July 2003 – April 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public outreach activities</td>
<td>January – September 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRC develop draft management recommendations</td>
<td>Spring 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>DENR review draft NC CHPP</td>
<td>May – June 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise draft NC CHPP</td>
<td>July – August 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public review</td>
<td>Summer – Fall 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise NC CHPP</td>
<td>July - August 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit NC CHPP to Commissions</td>
<td>September 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissions adopt NC CHPP</td>
<td>October - December 2004</td>
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ATTACHMENT 3
MAP OF COASTAL HABITAT PLAN MANAGEMENT UNITS

Coastal Habitat Protection Plan Management Units

Map information was collected from various federal, state, and private organizations. Every effort has been made to ensure the quality and accuracy of this information.