





Keeping Afloat

Documentary of a North Carolina fishing town shows the struggle of preserving a way of life

BY TIFFANY EDWARDS, STAFF WRITER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW BARR

IN THE COASTAL COMMUNITY OF SNEADS FERRY, THE ROMANCE OF THE NEW RIVER JOINS LOVERS. THE FURY OF THE ATLANTIC OCEAN, WHERE IT EMPTIES, TEARS FAMILIES APART. A TOMBSTONE BEARS PHOTOS OF DEPARTED LOVED ONES ON THE DECK OF THEIR BOAT. LITTLE GIRLS GROW UP WISHING TO BE MISS SHRIMP; AND LITTLE BOYS — AND SOMETIMES, GIRLS — SPEAK KNOWLEDGABLY ABOUT THE MECHANICS OF BOATS AND ASPIRE TO BE FISHERMEN LIKE THE GENERATIONS BEFORE THEM.

This small town, with a population of around 2,200, has a centuries-old history of fishing families, yet when fisherman John Edens hears his son Robert say he hopes to follow in his footsteps, John can't help but have mixed feelings.

"I hate to say it, but I've tried to talk him out of it," he admits in "Wild Caught: The Life and Struggles of an American Fishing Town." The 90-minute documentary directed by Matthew Barr of the Department of Broadcasting and Cinema explores the complicated forces that are threatening the livelihood and sense of community in this fishing village.

Robert says he is lured by the freedom of being a fisherman — one in two is self-employed — while John knows well the outside pressures his son will face.

For the past 300 years, the bounty of the waters surrounding Sneads Ferry provided jobs, fed families and a created a unique culture. Today the tradition is slowly fading in this small town 40 miles north of Wilmington. According to the North Carolina Coastal Federation, building permits



JOHNNY WAYNE MIDGETT, crabber, and family



MIKE "CHOPS" COWDRY JR., fisherman

are up 300 percent in some coastal counties, transforming the landscape from fishing docks and cottages to multi-unit condominiums. Imported seafood, which can be sold less expensively than locals can offer, is giving small-scale fishermen serious competition. In addition, young people are not entering the family fishing businesses due to the costs and hazards of being a fisherman, one of the most dangerous professions in the nation, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Compounding the problem are tightening government regulations and rising fuel costs. One fisherman estimates his fuel costs have risen over the past few years from \$18-25 a day to \$60-70 a day.

Years in the making

Nearly seven years ago, Barr set out to document this disappearing way of life. "This film is about more than fishing. It is about family, community, spirituality, life itself. These people have a connection to the natural world that most of us don't have," he says.

The documentary follows the activities of fishers, net makers, crab pot makers, merchants who sell fishing tackle, and others. Fisherman Mack Liverman estimates he has spent half

of his life at sea. During that time he lost two ships beneath him. Rev. John Norris, a shrimper and Pentecostal minister, weaves the philosophy of a fisherman into his sermons. Children venture out on the boats from the time they're in diapers, and at least one 10-year-old can tell you the difference between a lazy line and a whip line.

Barr says the small size of the town made building trust essential to capturing a realistic portrait of Sneads Ferry. There are approximately 38,000 commercial fishermen in the nation, including 7,000 in North Carolina. The tight-knit community of Sneads Ferry



JOHN NORRIS, shrimper and minister



TERI LIVERMAN, shrimper



has between 75 and 100 full-time commercial fishermen, estimates Johnny Wayne Midgett, a crabber, shrimper and past president of the Fishermen's Association in Sneads Ferry.

Barr invested a significant amount of time — more than six years of filming — getting to know the residents. "At the beginning of the film, (Andrew Midgett, son of Johnny Wayne) is a little boy. At the end he's wearing a size-13 shoe," he says.

The filmmaker also had initial concerns that negative stereotypes would lead residents to be hesitant to share their stories.

"These fishermen are practicing sustainable, small-scale fishing, but unfortunately in the mind's eye of the public, they're grouped together with large-scale, trawler operations," he says.



Fishing by the book

In the film, several fishermen discuss the burden of government regulations on landings. They argue that some rules are counterproductive to preserving fish stocks. By limiting what they can land to what they've caught in previous years it prevents them from fishing other species that are more abundant. They also posit that bad weather is a factor in what they catch, so past harvests may not necessarily indicate what is actually in the ocean.

"Of course we need the regulations. The question is how many regulations and what kind and how far do you go," says B.J. Copeland, a retired professor and current member of the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission. "Right now I would agree with the fishermen. There are too many regulations. This is a problem."

Not only does the viewer become involved in the families' personal plights, he or she

MATTHEW BARR, professor and filmmaker, spent six years documenting the struggles of Sneads Ferry fishermen from imports to regulations.



JOHN EDENS, fisherman



MACK LIVERMAN, shrimper, and his grandson

learns the broader implications of losing the nation's small-scale commercial fishing industry.

"There is a very deep value of having commercial fishermen on the water," says Dr. David Griffith, an anthropologist from East Carolina University. "They have an incredible knowledge about the relationship between oxygen levels and fish populations and pollution and run-off. They monitor the resources. If you take these guys off the water, which slowly seems to be happening, we're going to lose a huge base of knowledge about the resource."

Competition from abroad

Environmental concerns as well as issues of national security and self-sufficiency have prompted increased interest in buying local food in recent years. Worldwide, organic food sales increased 20 percent per year in the 1990s, and according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the number of farmers markets in the United States more than doubled from 1994 to 2004. Yet, 80 percent of the seafood sold in America today comes from abroad.

"You don't have to be a smart man to figure out that if you cut your (local) food sources how hard is it going to be to put a country on its knees?" says fisherman Ray Swaney Sr.

Seafood imports rose from \$5 billion in 1990 to \$11.3 billion in 2004. Seafood from other nations, 40 percent of which is farm-raised, often contains high amounts of antibiotics.

Sea music

This tension between the preservation of old ways and the adaptation of a new global, industrial model is a mood UNCG professor Dr. Pete Kellett tried to capture in the music he wrote to accompany "Wild Caught."

"I watched an early cut of the film and got a sense of the pace, rhythm, and tone of the film. Matt told me he wanted something with a haunting feel and a folk style that would accent the visual and narrative part of the film. From there I worked on three musical motifs

that were simple yet evocative, and in the style of English, Irish and Scottish folk songs that I heard as a child," says Kellett, who grew up on the northern coast of England.

"On a deeper level, each motif plays off of the dialectical tension of progress (change) and preservation (stability) that is central to the message being communicated by the film. The flute and banjo evoke change, while the guitar chords represent stability."

Kellett, who chairs the Department of Communication, performs on guitar with Dr. Steve Kroll-Smith (flute), head of the Department of Sociology, and Dr. Dave Wharton (banjo) of the Department of Classical Studies. The soundtrack was recorded in the WUAG studio.

The Unheard Voices Project

Barr has started a nonprofit organization, the Unheard Voices Project, to continue to make films about working class people. His previous film, "Carnival Train," explored the lives of carnival workers. "Wild Caught" was funded by grants from North Carolina Sea Grant, the North Carolina Arts Council and UNCG.

"Wild Caught" premiered in April in the Elliott University Center Auditorium. More than 300 people attended the screening and gave the film a standing ovation, Barr says. Crabber Johnny Wayne Midgett, who attended the event along with several other families from Sneads Ferry, says he was pleased with the turnout.

Barr plans to enter the documentary in film festivals around the country next year, as well as screen it for interested legislators and advocacy groups. Sen. Marc Basnight, who sits on the committee on seafood and aquaculture in the North Carolina General Assembly, makes an appearance in the film and shares his view that fishing towns such as Sneads Ferry should be financially supported as living fishing communities. The American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress will hold a copy of the documentary and the UNC system library will house transcripts of the film's interviews in Chapel Hill.

Holding onto hope, Johnny Wayne Midgett says, "If the public knew more what's going on, it might change things." 