



## N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

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### Partnership engages coastal high school students in blue crab research

**RALEIGH** – High school students from Morehead City and Swan Quarter will soon be working alongside Duke University researchers to study blue crab behavior and its implications for the endangered whooping crane.

Dr. Dan Rittschoff, L.H. Snowdon Professor of Ecology at Duke University Marine Lab, will lead the research effort, which will be assisted by students from Cape Lookout Marine Science High School and Mattamuskeet Early College High School.

The researchers are studying how blue crabs move and their vulnerability to predation by large wading birds like the whooping crane. Whooping cranes depend on blue crabs for the majority their diet as they migrate from their wintering grounds in coastal Texas to their breeding grounds in Canada. Their worldwide population dwindled to only 15 birds in the 1940s, but conservation efforts have resulted in a slow recovery for this migratory species.

Students will collect a variety of data in support of this effort, including water quality information and photographs of crabs in the Newport River and Lake Mattamuskeet. Students will also collect DNA samples from the crabs for further analysis by university experts.

“We are very excited about this opportunity to conduct research and extend our marine science curriculum into the real world” said Luther Tootle, chairman of the Cape Lookout Marine Science High School Board of Directors, said

Rittschof is similarly enthusiastic. “Fisheries and blue crabs are our heritage,” he notes. It is time to learn about and support that heritage. I like the idea of recognizing that science is fun and important to our daily lives and that we all can do it.”

The project is funded by a private foundation and the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program, where research efforts are underway in both North Carolina and Texas. This funding provides necessary supplies, instruments, and training to enable data collection on water quality and blue crab abundance by students, as well as curriculum support for teachers.

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