

Fishermen pitch compromise to park fishing plan

By Mike Voss
News Editor

Area commercial fishermen hope a compromise can be worked out with the state's Division of Parks and Recreation so they can continue to set crab pots and nets close to the shoreline at Goose Creek State Park in Beaufort County.

The fishermen attended a hearing Monday night concerning the possible extension of the park's boundary in the Pamlico River. The hearing was held at the park's visitors center.

The Division of Parks and Recreation has requested the state's Division of Marine Fisheries issue a proclamation prohibiting the setting of crab pots and gill nets within 100 yards of the shore of Goose Creek State Park. The director of DMF has the authority to issue such a proclamation.

The Division of Parks and Recreation contends the proclamation is needed for the following reasons:

- Establish a buffer zone so commercial fishermen and DMF and park personnel can better judge the location of the park boundary, thereby avoiding unintentional violations.

- Remove navigational hazards encountered by park visitors and staff when trying to navigate in the mouth of Little Goose Creek and along the park shoreline, about three miles.

- Educate commercial fishermen about the park's boundaries and state laws and regulations governing what happens inside those boundaries.

The N.C. Administrative Code prohibits persons other than park employees, contractors, or their agents from engaging in any commercial activities within the state's parks. The presence of fish nets and crab pots constitutes commercial activity, according to the Division of Parks and Recreation.

"We do water patrols in the area. Crab pots and nets are in our zone," said Scott Kirshner, superintendent of Goose Creek State Park.

The crab pots and nets hamper boat traffic entering and exiting Little Goose Creek. A boat ramp — Dinah Landing — is located on the creek.

"The 100 yards would interfere with commercial operations," said commercial fisherman Alton Parker.

Mac Jones, who buys from the fishermen, said the existing boundary — 150 feet — should be marked so the fishermen would know what areas to avoid. He said there's no need to extend the existing boundary another 50 yards.

"Asking for the additional 150 feet is probably unfair," Jones said.

Parker said the commercial fishermen, especially crabbers, need to be able to fish as close to the shore as possible. In the summer months, the middle of the Pamlico River tends to have "dead" water. That means dissolved oxygen levels in the water are low in the middle of the river. Crabs move toward the shore where there is more oxygen, Parker said.

Extending the boundary would threaten fishermen's livelihoods, Parker said.

Bonner Layton said he didn't want to be forced away from a shoreline that he's fished along for years. Layton said crabbers can't afford to be prohibited from harvesting crabs in a productive area such as the shoreline along the park.

Layton said that area is his "stomping ground" and an area frequented by many fishermen.

"What they're telling me to do is pick up my stuff and go somewhere else," he said.

The fishermen in the audience of about 40 said they would be willing to have a channel marked in the creek and refrain from fishing in that channel in exchange for the park dropping its request to extend its boundary farther into the river. The fishermen said that deal would protect their interests and provide a channel free of crab pots and nets for boaters using the creek.

Kirshner and DMF staff at the hearing were not sure which state or federal agency would be responsible for marking the proposed channel. But once marked, the DMF enforcement officers could enforce regulations banning crab pots and nets from being set in the channel.

DMF personnel said they would make a recommendation on the matter to the DMF director within a couple of weeks.