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N.C. scientist works with fishermen to shape coastal policy

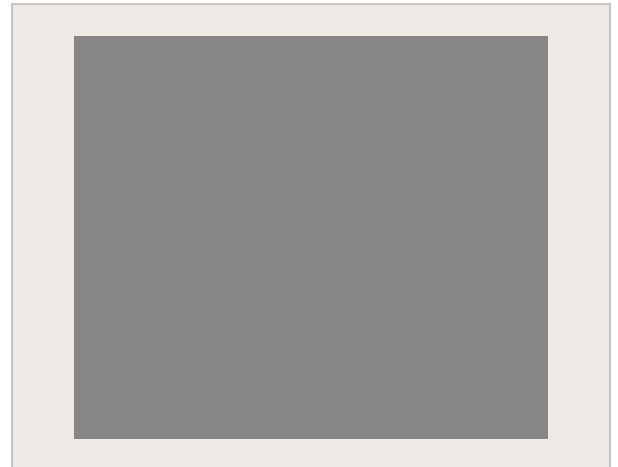
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TYLER DUKES



IMAGES



Doug Rader, right, chief oceans scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, talks with fisherman Willy Phillips about conditions in North Carolina's sounds. TYLER DUKES

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BY TYLER DUKES - CORRESPONDENT

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Doug Rader learned one of his most powerful lessons from an angry man hauling a bucket of diseased fish.

As a new state official in the mid-1980s, Rader was running a town hall meeting on regulations for peat mining near marine habitats in Eastern North Carolina. With hundreds packed into a high school gym in Swan Quarter, a fisherman clad in waders emerged from the crowd, reached into his pail and smacked a sore-ridden specimen right on a desk.

This was what they could all expect, the bearded man told Rader and the audience, if unregulated peat mining was allowed to continue. The gym erupted in applause.

"It was an eye-opener, I'll tell you

OFFSHORE ENERGY POLICY

In 2009, Gov. Bev Perdue established the Governor's Scientific Advisory Panel on Offshore Energy.

The charge: The group is evaluating offshore energy options for the state - oil, natural gas, wind and other renewables - and considering energy technology, applicable laws and areas of concern.

The deadline: The panel's final report is due Sept. 18.

The outcome: Creation of the panel was prompted by the U.S. Department of the Interior's proposed sale of three offshore oil and natural gas leases through 2015, as well as new research showing North Carolina's high potential for wind energy. The panel will make policy recommendations to guide legislation, but it will be up to lawmakers and the governor to decide what to do with the report.

Source: N.C. governor's office, Doug Rader

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that," Rader said with a laugh. "He was a working waterman. He had not taken the time to put on a coat and tie and engage with his public officials."

Armed with a fresh Ph.D. in biology from UNC-Chapel Hill at the time, Rader said he assumed strong science and hard facts would be enough to form effective environmental policy. But the fisherman he now knows well as Willy Phillips, owner of Full Circle Crab Co., taught him otherwise.

"You also have to see it through the eyes of the people who are affected," said Rader, now the chief oceans scientist of the Environmental Defense Fund, a nonprofit advocacy group.

Rader will continue to draw heavily on that lesson as he works with the Governor's Scientific Advisory Panel on Offshore Energy. The group expects to release a final report on North Carolina's coastal energy resources - from oil and gas drilling to wind and other renewables - in mid-September. But as he learned from more than 25 years of experience, turning good science into good policy is far from easy.

"People are justifiably worried that their personal ecological stake is threatened by offshore energy futures," Rader said. "That's a real risk."

A fragile balance

During a visit in late April, Rader often talked with both hands as he navigated his Prius east along U.S. 64. He gestured toward the distance, explaining that the hidden biology is "seething this time of year with babies."

"What happens in our little creeks in northeast North Carolina has a direct impact on what used to be massively productive fish species," Rader said. "It doesn't look like much, but this is ground zero for the health of the North Atlantic."

As beachgoers head to the Outer Banks, shad and herring move upstream to spawn. Rivers and estuaries will serve as nurseries to protect the vulnerable young of species from striped bass to blue crab.

"There's not anywhere else like that where so many animals are so inextricably linked to land and sea," Rader said. "That's what makes North Carolina special."

That link matters to fishermen like Phillips, whose company deals directly in catch from the Albemarle Sound. In his decades on the water, he's moved his family several times to keep fishing as over-harvesting and run-off pollution devastated the marine population.

"We've gone from feast to famine in the fishing industry," Phillips said at his Columbia, N.C., retail operation just off U.S. 64. "We're left with a ghost of what we once had."

Add regulations to manage the state's fisheries, and many watermen bristle.

"There's this long-lingering resentment that fishermen are the only ones targeted for punitive action," Phillips said, "that we're the only ones bearing the brunt of the decline in productivity."

But the weathered Phillips doesn't see it that way. Since their first meeting, he and Rader have worked together on several projects to study the health of the marine environment in and around the Albemarle-Pamlico estuaries, and to craft rules for harvesting fish.

Collaborating with men who work on the water, Rader said, helps them realize that creating sustainable fisheries also means sustaining their way of life.

"It makes it possible to lay aside the arrows and darts you've been conditioned to use," Phillips said. "You're not going to be regulated into doing the right thing. You have to want to do the right thing."

For 'people and critters'

Douglas Rader

Title: Chief oceans scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund.

Age: 56.

Family: Married, three children.

Other interests: Rader has been on more than 500 scuba dives all over the world. He's also passionate about archaeology and enjoys collecting and identifying pottery shards he finds in the ground. "I look at dirt," Rader said. "Soil tells the ecological and cultural history of a place."

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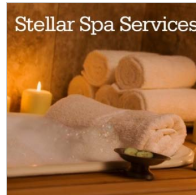
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Rader has learned that buy-in from fishermen counts. It certainly worked this past decade, when Rader and members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight such groups in the U.S. responsible for regulating fish stocks, wrestled with how to protect 23,000 square miles of deepwater coral off the coast. The ecosystem, a fertile fishing ground for golden crabbers and deepwater shrimpers, is still a subject of intense study by ocean scientists.

"That's an unusual thing," Rader said. "We were getting information hot off the boat."

Duane Harris, a member of the management council who's worked with Rader for more than 15 years, said the EDF scientist was instrumental in bringing that science - and the fishermen it affects - to the table.

"The best thing you can do is to have someone communicate to the fishermen in terms they understand," Harris said. "It's helpful to have someone that understands the science and communicates it well. That's what Doug does best."

With the endorsement of scientists and fishermen, the council in July 2010 designated five deepwater coral reefs from the coasts of Florida to North Carolina as Habitat Areas of Particular Concern, which protects the sensitive ecosystems from fishing.

"If we had a bunch of opposition, it probably wouldn't have been successful. But nobody opposed it," Harris said. "It was a win-win for everyone."

Although the designation does not prevent oil and gas drilling in the area, Harris said, it will raise a red flag for groups like the governor's advisory panel. Whether it's drilling for deep-sea oil or building wind farms, Rader said, every offshore energy technology has pros and cons. In particular, they all affect both marine ecosystems and the location of fishing grounds.

What's crucial, Rader said, is developing forward-thinking offshore energy policy that works for "people and critters" - something he believes the panel's report will do.

"Even if you know there's an iceberg ahead, is this the right time to act?" Rader said. "Many of us believe it is."

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