

Festival draws throngs to Morehead City waterfront

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MOREHEAD CITY

THE 20TH anniversary of the North Carolina Seafood Festival was celebrated by a crowd that included first timers and loyal friends.

"I've been here every year the festival has been here," said Susan Han-nula Stroup of Beaufort, who helped serve crab dip and an assortment of seafood soups for the East Carteret High School Foreign Language Club.

The Seafood Festival is a major fund-raiser each year for a variety of school, church and civic organiza-



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Like sardines: The threat of rain doesn't seem to keep folks away from the Seafood Festival Saturday.

tions who sell everything from shrimp pitas, crab cakes and scallop fritters to help raise money for athletic uni-

forms, band equipment, student trips and church ministries.

This year, Stroup was helping the school club raise money for a spring break trip to Peru. In year's past, the East Carteret teacher has stepped up to help with other booths for East Carteret or pitched in as a parent volunteer for seafood booths operated by St. Egbert's School.

And as she's worked, she's watched the festival grow into an event that helps local community groups, provides family entertainment and draws a crowd to the county each October.

"Every year it grows and grows and

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grows," she said. "It's a wonderful thing for the community and the people, and it brings visitors to the county."

While rain fell at times during the festival weekend, overcast skies cleared for much of the afternoon Saturday and brought out crowd that filled the Morehead City waterfront.

Festival visitors streamed along the streets, browsing the arts and crafts and hungrily eyeing the seafood.

The latter was exactly what Kurt and Anita Davis of Greenville were after during their first visit to the festival.

"We've been in Greenville for six years and heard about the festival the first year we got here and kept saying we were going to go. We finally made it," said Anita Davis as she and her husband stopped to taste a bit of the seafood that brought them to Morehead City.

And they were careful to try seafood that had been locally caught.

"We've been looking for the

flag," Davis said, referring to the "Carteret Catch" flags that fly at the vendor booths where local seafood is being sold.

When the Seafood Festival was started 20 years ago, one of the main goals established was to promote seafood and the commercial fishing industry in North Carolina.

A big part of that effort is seen at the Coastal Yesterday and Today tents help educate the public about commercial fishing past and present and the need to protect the coastal resources that support the industry.

Making a first appearance at the festival is the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, a group of fishermen who have joined together to operate The Ocracoke Seafood Company and save the village's last fish house.

"(Commercial fishing) is part of the tradition and heritage of the whole area, not just Ocracoke," said Rudy Austin, who talked with festival visitors as they stopped by the tent.

The Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association signed a 12-month lease on the fish house and has until May 1, 2007, to raise the \$409,000 it needs to purchase it. Along with operating the fish house, the organization sees the effort as a way to give local watermen a secure base of operations and be a retail source of locally caught seafood.

The fishermen also see the fish house as place for educating people about commercial fishing and for showing them hands-on the skills of their livelihood.

Robin Payne said it's not enough to just remember com-

mercial fishing's place in the past.

As festival-goers enjoyed the day and sampled their favorite seafood, Payne said it's also important to remember the seafood we eat today is because of the fishermen carrying on the work of the fathers and grandfathers.

"I want them to know that this isn't just photographs and history that they are seeing. (Commercial fishing) is still happening," Payne said.

The Seafood Festival continues today at 10 a.m. with the Blessing of the Fleet at the state port in Morehead City and food vendors, crafts, rides and entertainment along the waterfront until 5 p.m.

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