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Huge Cape Fear Shoals Habitat is Saltwater Focus at North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher

KURE BEACH – The crown jewel of marine exhibits at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher is the 24-foot-deep Cape Fear Shoals exhibit, which is home to nearly 300 sea creatures.

Holding 14 times more water than the aquarium's next-largest saltwater tank, Cape Fear Shoals offers visitors a visual underwater feast. Approximately 30 species, including sharks, groupers, stingrays, and moray eels cruise through the deep-sea canyons of a spectacular offshore reef habitat.

Five separate viewing windows on two levels allow visitors to peer into the exhibit from various vantage points and see different areas of the reef. As one approaches the exhibit from either the main floor or the mezzanine level, twin 16-foot-tall, 8-inch-thick windows provide striking views of the habitat's sandy bottom, its coral-and-sponge-covered walls and the rippling surface above.

A large, hemispheric window at ground level invites visitors to lean inside for an intimate view of a narrow sea-bottom gorge, as Atlantic spadefish and silver porgies swim by, only inches from the window. A rectangular pane on the upper level yields wide-angle views of creatures around a craggy ledge. The fifth window, at the back of the exhibit, opens into a cave where moray eels gape from their rocky lairs.

Several times each day, divers enter the tank to perform routine cleaning and maintenance. Twice daily, divers use an underwater communications system to answer visitor questions from within the tank. Although some of the divers are members of the aquarium staff, most are community volunteers. The aquarium seeks and trains certified divers interested in participating in the dive programs.

The Cape Fear Shoals exhibit portrays a habitat typical of offshore areas near the mouth of the Cape Fear River. During the last ice age, when sea levels were much lower than today, meandering rivers cut through ancient rock formations to form arroyos, or canyons. As continental glaciers melted, the Atlantic Ocean rose, submerging the

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formation. Although the aquarium exhibit exaggerates the depth of these submarine canyons, the plants and animals visitors see here are those usually found in such a habitat.

The sharks, rays and reef fishes in this 235,000-gallon exhibit are quite real, but the sponges, corals and plant life upon its rocky cliffs are not. Each was molded, attached and hand-painted by a Wilmington-based movie set design firm. The rock formations were made by spraying a specially formulated concrete material called gunnite onto a concrete framework.

Cape Fear Shoals is just one of two major exhibit areas added during a major aquarium expansion completed in 2002. A second feature, the Cape Fear Conservatory, is a 22,000-square-foot atrium dedicated to the freshwater plants and animals of the Cape Fear River watershed. Additional aquarium upgrades include an indoor salt marsh and a sea horse exhibit, new in 2003, and a loggerhead sea turtle exhibit, completed in 2004. The aquarium's most recent addition is the Exotic Aquatics gallery, which opened in November of 2005. It focuses on strange and beautiful species that are not commonly found along North Carolina's shores. The new displays house lionfish, cuttlefish, spiny lobsters, Pacific reef fishes, and an octopus.

For details, contact Bob Roush or Donna Moffitt at (910) 458-8257. For complete information and program schedules, visit: www.ncaquariums.com