

11/01/06 Penderwatch Hosts Two Black River Eco-Cruises

More than sixty intrepid members of PenderWatch & Conservancy and other nature lovers eagerly climbed aboard the MV Capt. J.N. Maffitt for two separate environmental excursions up the Cape Fear and Black Rivers last week. The tours were organized by PenderWatch and narrated by naturalist Andy Wood, education director of Audubon North Carolina and a Pender County resident.

PenderWatch & Conservancy is an all-volunteer environmental advocacy group centered in Pender County.

Braving a stiff north breeze and frigid early-fall wind chills, the eco-tourists enjoyed four fascinating hours on the historic rivers cruising past ancient cypress groves, broad expanses of marsh grass and feral rice, and flocks of migrating tree swallows and other birds.

Among the participants were several Pender residents who had grown up near the Black River but had never taken a guided nature tour of the river. They shared their own personal stories on deck with the other travelers.

Andy Wood described the ecology and history of the rivers during the upstream portion of the trip, noting that the area between the South Carolina border and central Pender County, known as the Cape Fear Dome, has the greatest bio-diversity of anywhere along the East Coast north of Florida.

He related how early settlers grew the finest rice in the world along the Cape Fear River, but lost their fortunes when they dredged the riverbed to attract ocean-going ships to come further inland to load more rice for export – inadvertently allowing salt water to invade the riverside rice fields and making them unfit for agriculture.

Wood also told the amateur explorers how settlers made their living collecting sap from the seemingly endless forests of long leaf pines to produce turpentine and pitch, essential items for wooden sailing ships. These so-called “naval stores,” he said, were a lucrative export industry until petroleum-based products replaced them in the mid-1800’s. Then the workers turned full-time to cutting down the tall, straight pines for lumber to supply rampant nation-wide construction. What had been a vast long leaf pine forest stretching across 93 million acres from the East Coast to Texas and southern Illinois, he said, now covers only three million acres.

The Capt. Maffitt’s skipper, “Captain Ron,” pointed out a low, tree-covered bluff that 150 years ago was the Peachtree Steamboat Stop. He recounted how local residents always turned out to meet the steamboat that called there weekly to deliver groceries, tools, newspapers, and even an occasional visiting doctor from Wilmington.

The Capt. Maffitt chugged north up the Black River until the possibility of sandbars and submerged “snag” trees obliged it to turn around and head back to its home base behind the battleship USS North Carolina across from Wilmington. During the downstream leg of the voyage Wood set up a small biology lab on the fantail and conducted a class. He showed the

passengers jars containing river fish, crabs, and insects, as well as magnified slides of living microscopic animals. He also passed around samples of carnivorous plants from the area, including Venus fly traps and pitcher plants.

Upcoming PenderWatch events include guest speaker Lauren Kolodij, program director of the North Carolina Coastal Federation and a Pender County resident. Ms. Kolodij will make a presentation on the Low-Impact Development concept, an increasingly popular approach to designing residential communities to minimize damage to the environment and control the polluting effects of stormwater runoff on creeks and waterways. LID has the support of many environmental groups and government agencies as well as the National Association of Home Builders. Ms. Kolodij will speak at the next PenderWatch board meeting on Wednesday, November 8, at 7 pm at the Hampstead Library on US 17. PenderWatch board meetings are open to all group members and the interested public. For further information call 270-3839.