

Fecal matter taints creeks

Development in and around Monkey Junction correlates with an increase in pollution

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The slew of new development in and around Monkey Junction hasn't just led to more traffic congestion on South College and Carolina Beach roads.

The growth coincided with an increase in suspended sediments and fecal coliform levels in Barnards and Motts creeks, the two tidal creeks in the area that flow into the Cape Fear River.

"We saw sharp increases in pollutants in both creeks," said Mike Mallin, a research biologist with the Center for Marine Science at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

But the latest tidal creeks report by UNCW researchers, which covers sampling between August 2001 and July 2002, wasn't all bad news.

Futch, Howe and Pages creeks all maintained generally good water quality, and other waterways showed marked improvements for certain pollutants.

But Dr. Mallin cautioned that some of the improvement over prior years could be attributed to last year's drought – which meant less runoff flowed into the creeks – and not necessarily an overall increase in the health of the waterways.

"One thing that stands out is that these creeks have big problems that aren't going to be fixed in a short amount of time," said Dave Mayes, Wilmington's stormwater services manager.

Case in point was fecal coliform levels, which remained stubbornly high almost across the board.

"Compared to past years, it was pretty typical," Dr. Mallin said. "It's problematic."

Excessive fecal coliform levels, which means samples exceeded the state standard for human contact more than 25 percent of the time, was a problem in Barnard's, Bradley, Burnt Mill and Motts creeks. The bacteria also was a problem in the uppermost sections of Howe Creek, parts of Smith Creek and the unnamed tributary that drains Greenfield Lake into the Cape Fear River.

Fecal coliform, a bacteria found in human and animal waste – pet waste is the most common way it reaches local waterways – can cause diarrhea and other gastrointestinal problems.

Greenfield Lake, which is plagued by algal blooms during much of the year, also remained a problem – although sampling showed it to be in better shape than the year before due to less runoff flowing into it from neighboring lawns and roads.

The tidal creeks study also showed some positive trends.

One was Hewletts Creek. We think Hewletts is a good candidate for shellfishing restoration," Dr. Mallin said, noting that the mouth of the tidal creek is now intermittently open for shellfishing.

UNCW researchers plan to perform dye testing in the creek this spring to see if a dredging project similar to what was performed in Futch Creek in the mid-1990s would help improve water quality.

Futch Creek is now considered the cleanest tidal creek in the county and the only waterway entirely open for shellfishing.

The study, along with data from past reports, also showed that the detention ponds on Burnt Mill Creek and along tributaries entering Greenfield Lake do help catch and reduce many pollutants.

The latest report is the ninth in-

stallment of the tidal creeks report.

The annual report allows researchers to track changes in the health of area waterways due to human impacts, such as development, or weather-related incidents, such as hurricanes or drought.

Equally as important, Dr. Mallin said the program – which started monitoring the county's creeks in 1993 – also shows a continued financial commitment and interest by the city and county in the health of its waterways.

"Because of the monitoring program, we can recruit interest and funds from outside New Hanover County to help make improvements," Mr. Mayes said.

"But we've only made baby steps so far."

The program is funded by New Hanover County, Wilmington, the state Clean Water Management Trust Fund and the N.C. Wetlands Restoration Program.

