

Protecting the environment

UNCW's McLellan gets an Earth Day honor for work with stranded marine mammals

BY MILLARD K. IVES

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A UNCW research scientist was given an Environmental Hero award Sunday for investigating marine mammal strandings throughout the nation.

William A. McLellan was honored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration at Greenfield Park amphitheater as part of the Lower Cape Fear celebration of Earth Day.

"NOAA and the nation are fortunate to have such dedicated people volunteer so much of their time," said Conrad Lautenbacher, an NOAA administrator.

Mr. McLellan is one of 35 individuals to be so honored across the nation, and the only one in North Carolina.

"I believe it's important to try and understand the environment," said Mr. McLellan, shortly after accepting a plaque and accompanying Earth Day gifts from NOAA.

"It can make a better place for all of us."

Mr. McLellan has been responding to strandings – marine mammals beaching themselves – for more than 18 years and is currently the large whale necropsy team leader for the

Mid-Atlantic and the North Carolina state stranding coordinator.

According to background provided by NOAA, he has driven thousands of miles and volunteered numerous hours in his effort to assist networks and scientists in understanding the causes of strandings and mysterious and human-induced deaths in marine mammals. His work has taken him to the West Coast and Texas.

He has been a significant part of the large whale response team along the Atlantic coast, spending many days studying animals to determine what caused them to die.

"Some of these animals should be living to be 100 years old and they are dying too quickly," he said.

"Determining what happened to them and creating a better environment can help humans discover how to make the earth better for them and us," he said.

He said one of his most notable research projects was working with bottle-nosed dolphins off Wrightsville Beach.

He said he would eventually like to conduct research on how to maintain the population of Right Whales off the North Carolina's coast, whose numbers are dwindling, he said.

Established in 1995 to commemo-



STAFF PHOTO | JEFFREY S. OTTO

William McLellan poses with a vertebra from a baby humpback whale in the necropsy lab of Dobo Hall at UNCW. Mr. McLellan was awarded an Environmental Hero award from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

rate the 25th anniversary of Earth Day, the Environmental Hero award is presented to individuals and organizations that volunteer their time and energy to help NOAA carry out its mission.

Sunday's Earth Day celebration included bands and several activities relating to protecting the earth, including a bike outing by several participants to express the need for an environmental safe alternative transportation.

Officials also planted a 30-foot Oak tree in the park that had been scheduled to be chopped down for a nearby development.

"We want to celebrate what the world has to offer," said Jennifer O'Keefe, Earth Day Alliance chairman.