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MarineQuest reaches out to Hispanic kids

By Mike Voorheis
Staff Writer

Juan Velazco hurried back inside the white activity bus to change into his wading shorts. The other students in the MarineQuest ecology camp had already changed into clothes that were OK to get wet, muddy and possibly torn.

Juan returned in a flash, and after retying his shoes (loose shoes can fall off and be buried in the muck), he rejoined his classmates to drop his net into the nearly stagnant edge waters of the Cape Fear River.

Some of the not-quite-teenage boys read a nearby alligator warning sign and teased their classmates, enjoying the bit of nervousness they had injected into their fellow students.

Juan, accompanied by friend Luis Duque walked on, oblivious to the sign.

Still, Juan was the last student to get his feet wet, even motioning for an awkward reporter to

cross under the pier in front of him. After some coaxing, Juan covered his eyes and took his first steps into the water and the ankle-deep mud of the Cape Fear.

Soon, he and Luis waded confidently through the waters, toting a net and hoping to find large blue crabs they can carry back to the blue cooler filled with aquatic creatures awaiting further examination by the inquisitive group and instructor Bethany Noller.

Like the other students at the ecology camp, Juan and Luis are learning how to identify different sea creatures from the freshwater of the Northeast Cape Fear to the saltwater of the Atlantic Ocean. Unlike their classmates, Juan and Luis communicate primarily in Spanish.

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Without the prompting of New Hanover High School science teacher Tim Barker, their science education would have been limited to their studies at Roland-Grise Middle School.

But Mr. Barker asked Diane Talley, director of MarineQuest, if the university had any programs that might benefit the boys. Or rather, he would have asked, had Ms. Talley let him finish the sentence.

As soon as he mentioned that the boys were Hispanic, Ms. Talley said yes.

Wanting to reach out to a demographic that rarely gets to experience summer enrichment programs, Ms. Talley eagerly responded. And she just happened to know an assistant camp counselor who was bilingual.

Thus, 15-year-old Hoggard junior Kaitlin Baden became their translator and, with the help of a scholarship funded primarily by the UNCW Center for Marine Science, the boys were given the opportunity to expand their minds.

"One of the goals within the camp is to encourage them and inspire them to want to go to college," Ms. Talley said. "We get them on campus and show them that this is within their grasp.



STAFF PHOTO | PAUL STEPHEN

Luis Duque and Juan Velazco team up to hunt for aquatic life.

The goal of the program is to encourage minority kids to dream."

When Juan caught a minnow, he walked across the the murky terrain, carrying his net at waist level. Kaitlin stopped him and spoke to him in a long sentence that ended with the word *agua*. He then proceeded toward the cooler, dipping his net into the water after every step across the mud, remembering to keep the tiny fish immersed in the *agua* as much as possible.

Though they actively participate in the activities, Luis and Juan rarely enter into dialogue with their classmates and they don't participate in the group discussions.

But occasionally, Kaitlin will walk over to Juan (she correctly

pronounces his name "hwan") and explain which organism is being displayed and how to distinguish a male from a female.

The boys probably are not picking up as much scientific information as their classmates.

But just by attending the program, they are learning about water life and preservation.

"We hope to integrate more and more minority kids," Ms. Talley said. "We're hoping it will snowball."

She envisions a day when she can hold a camp just for Hispanic students.

Already, MarineQuest has taken a step in the right direction, thanks to the cooperation of the public schools, the university and a bright, mature 15-year-old.

"We hope to integrate more and more minority kids. We're hoping it will snowball."

Diane Talley
UNCW MarineQuest
director



STAFF PHOTO | PAUL STEPHEN

Juan Velazco (left), Luis Duque and Katie Baden examine a shrimp during the MarineQuest summer enrichment program.