



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

December 1, 2010

Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly.
–Oscar Hammerstein
and Jerome Kern

Go Fish

The conflict between industry and ecosystems is embedded in the history of American rivers. The Cape Fear River estuary seems to have been spared the worst of the depredations of development, but all is not well beneath the waters.

American shad and blueback herring, once important commercial fish, have nearly disappeared from the river. The shortnose sturgeon is listed as endangered, and the American sturgeon is next. Striped bass cannot be taken in the river. Portions of the Cape Fear River and estuarine areas are currently rated as impaired according to recent Division of Water Quality monitoring. All of the Cape Fear estuary and its tributaries, except an area on the east side below Fort Fisher, are prohibited to shellfish harvesting.

Last year's bird count by the Cape Fear Audubon Society showed reduced numbers of many species inhabiting the shore.

Now we face the threat of further pollution from a cement plant on the Northeast Cape Fear River and significant loss of habitat and other environmental devastation from a container terminal at Southport and its associated channel dredging.

It's an uneven battle, for there is money to be made and vanity to be nourished with these projects. But the North Carolina Coastal Federation and Cape Fear River Watch are building a strong coalition against the Titan cement project. The North Carolina International terminal is teetering, and just needs a determined push to fall of its own weight.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service is leading the cheers for the Corps of Engineers long-overdue project to create an effective fish passage over the first of the dams that isolates anadromous fish from fresh-water spawning areas. Restoration of some fish populations and others up the marine food chain should be in the offing.

It's time to refocus the public eye on the Cape Fear as a natural treasure of regional and national significance. We believe the recreational and commercial value of this critical ecosystem should be recognized as far more significant than more cement and more sneakers from China. We look for ways to preserve and develop the Cape for sustainable uses—even reviving an old proposal of the National Park Service for a national reservation at the Cape Fear.