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June 1, 2016

Several Hundred Attend Endangered Species and World Fish Migration Day Event

It was a big day for sea turtles, Atlantic salmon, and whale named "Salt." The 43-foot inflatable humpback whale, named after a well-known living humpback seen in the Gulf of Maine, was a big hit with visitors to the Woods Hole Science Aquarium's Endangered Species and World Fish Migration Day event May 21. It was the whale's first appearance at the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, of which the Aquarium is a part, in Woods Hole.

An estimated 300 people participated in the two-hour event. Some were local residents and visitors from other Cape Cod towns, but many came from other cities and towns in Massachusetts as well as 18 states and one foreign country - a tour group from France. Most spent time looking at exhibits and displays in the Aquarium and its conference room, where endangered sea turtles and Atlantic salmon were featured, along with an arts and crafts table that attracted many of the youngest visitors.

Atlantic salmon researchers Ruth Haas-Castro and Mark Renkawitz spoke about salmon research in Maine and in waters as far as West Greenland, where many of Maine's salmon spend years at sea before returning to natal rivers in Maine to spawn. A video showed research operations in the field, and other materials focused on research and conservation efforts to help save the endangered population.

A microscope with a salmon scale to view was a popular attraction for people of all ages. "Lots of small children who had never looked through a microscope were fascinated by it," said Haas-Castro, who like other researchers entertained a steady stream of visitors and their questions. "The little ones were more interested in the scope itself than in the salmon scales that were on the stage to see!"

Like salmon, Atlantic sturgeon are a diadromous species, a fact which surprised some visitors. Diadromous species spend part of their life in fresh water and part in salt water. "One visitor recounted a story to me of swimming in a New Hampshire River as a youngster and seeing a large creature pass by underneath with pointed armor on his back," said Haas-Castro. "At the time he thought it was some sort of monster like Loch Ness, but later realized it must have been a sturgeon!"

Turtle researcher Kara Dodge explained the different species of sea turtles found in waters off the Northeast coast and had a few examples on display. Visitors could measure

sample carapaces with calipers and measuring tapes and record the information on their own data sheets. Different types of tags used to identify and track turtles at sea, such as satellite, flipper and PIT tags, brought questions. A video of a leatherback at sea during a research cruise attracted attention, as did the Aquarium's life-size leatherback on display. Handout materials were available for visitors to take home and share with friends, family and school classmates.

"Do sea turtles really get THAT big? is one of the most frequent questions I was asked about the leatherback model," Dodge said, referring to the Aquarium's life-size leatherback exhibit. "Visitors also liked the video of the leatherback feeding on jellyfish, especially the kids, who sometimes cheered when the turtle ate one. How old turtles get, what kinds come into local waters and why were also frequent questions."

Aquarium staff and volunteers at the arts and crafts tables helped visitors make jellyfish and suncatchers, decorate sea turtle shells made from cardboard bowls, and cut out and color paper Atlantic salmon wind socks.

Outside it was hard to miss the whale and the related displays under a blue tent on the nearby parking lot. Staff from the Center's Protected Species Branch (PSB) answered questions about endangered North Atlantic right whales as well as humpbacks and other whale species.

"People were interested in learning about the whales and seemed surprised to know they live right off our coast," said Genevieve Davis, a PSB researcher. Samples of baleen, rib bones and vertebra from several whale species were on display. Visitors could listen to whale and other marine mammal sounds, and identify photos of right whales by the patterns of callosities on their heads.

The big black inflatable whale was definitely a highlight of the day for many. "There aren't many chances in life to get inside a whale and learn about them," Davis said. "People were really excited about it and were lining up before we even opened!"

Visitors of all ages took their shoes off and entered the "belly of the whale" for a short presentation from Grace Simpkins of the NOAA Outreach and Education on Protected Species (NOEPS) program, developed by PSB to bring new research materials into K-5 classrooms.

"They had great questions about whale anatomy and current threats to these amazing animals," said Simpkins, who was inside the inflatable much of the afternoon talking about the whale and answering questions. "We all tried to hold our breath like a whale and marveled at their 3 stomachs."

Simpkins said visitors also had many questions about the whale bones and baleen, and enjoyed seeing them on the inflatable whale as well as the real thing at the display tables. "One little girl from Minnesota told me she was sure her BFF would want to hear that she went in a whale!"

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Related links:

Meet the real "Salt": <http://stellwagen.noaa.gov/visit/whalewatching/top50/salt.html>

NEFSC's Protected Species Branch: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/>

Woods Hole Science Aquarium: <http://aquarium.nefsc.noaa.gov/>
NOAA Outreach and Education on Protected Species (NOEPS):
<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/NOEPS/>