



Local students learn to care for animals that walk tall on the land...

It's a Jungle in Here

Unique Program Trains Future Zookeepers

North Carolina is unique in that it is home not only to a 1,500-acre "natural habitat" zoo, in Asheboro, but also three different aquariums along its coastline. Each highlights the state's diverse aquatic environments, which include the Atlantic Ocean as well as numerous estuaries, rivers and streams.

And until five years ago, these employers were hard-pressed to find staff educated in caring for animals in captivity. The Zoo and Aquarium Science program at Davidson County Community College (DCCC), founded by DCCC biology professor Mark Stevens, is changing that.

The zoo is a state-funded operation, and Stevens became concerned that tax dollars were going toward a facility that had barely any native North Carolina employees. He found out that there were no colleges training future zoo personnel in the state at the time.

Stevens set out to change that right away. It took nearly a year and a half to launch the Associate of Applied Science degree program in Zoo and Aquarium Science Technology at the college, a process that included building working relationships with animal habitats across the Southeast.

The new degree path debuted in fall 2007 as one of only six such programs nationwide, with an enrollment of 20 students. Today, the program is so selective that only 24 of the approximately



...and those that swim many miles below the ocean's surface.

80 applications received each fall are accepted.

Currently, students study heavily in both zoological and aquarium sciences, but DCCC expects to launch its fully tailored aquarium program in the fall 2013 semester.

During each of the current program's five semesters, participants must complete 320 hours of internship. In order for students to complete the degree requirements in time, they must spend their summer breaks working at one of the eight aquariums



DCCC Zoo and Aquarium Science students got a chance to visit with nature expert and TV host Jeff Corwin.

or 10 animal habitat facilities in the program's network.

Those rigorous requirements have meant that only about 60 percent of those who are accepted into the program graduate with a degree. However, 80 percent of those who do make it all the way through find either full-time or part-time employment in their field, or go on to further their education at other universities with advanced degrees in biology or zoology.

The program, according to Stevens, can offer much more than a strong academic foundation, networking opportunities and jobs. It can help students learn to respect the natural world and humanity's place in it.

Being up close and personal with animals, Stevens says, "can change people's perspective and appreciation for wildlife. We're not the only species here." ■ *By Ryan Newhouse*

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