my view

A Thin (monofilament) Line Between Life and Death

ON A COLD winter day at Cape Lookout Point you're likely to not see a tire track or human footprint. Wildlife abounds and you can get the feeling that you are on one of the most pristine beaches on Earth. Pelicans, cormorants and gulls are on the beach, sea oats sway in the dunes, bottlenose dolphins swimming near the surf are not unusual, and you might possibly see a harbor seal or whale. Upon closer inspection, a contrasting image will likely become evident – litter on the beach and lots of it.

On one such day in December 2005, I was fortunate to be there with some of my volunteer co-workers from the North Carolina Maritime Museum. We had completed some maintenance chores at the museum's field station (the former USCG station) at Cape Lookout and went out to the point to pick up trash and look for animal carcasses for study. While walking, we noticed two brown pelicans on the beach near the water's edge in an unusual posture. One appeared to be sitting near the other that was lying on its back. Both birds were alive and both looked disheveled. As we approached, what we feared became obvious. The two birds were struggling, entangled in the same piece of discarded monofilament fishing line.

Wildlife entangled in discarded monofilament fishing line is a pervasive problem, which appears to be getting worse in North Carolina. Just within the past year I have found carcasses of one bottlenose dolphin, two sea turtles and several birds, all that either had monofilament fishing line or net still on them or had

Two live pelicans entangled in the same piece of monofilament fishing line.

Proposed monofilament receptacle.

Discarded fishing line in boat propeller.

A bottlenose dolphin calf seen alive entangled in monofilament fishing line, later found dead on Shackleford Banks.

Green sea turtle found stranded alive near Cape Lookout entangled in monofilament fishing net.

evidence of having been entangled. In addition, I've encountered several live entangled bottlenose dolphins, sea turtles and birds (osprey, pelicans, gannets, and cormorants). In many cases the entanglements are fatal, resulting in slow, painful deaths.

But the pair of pelicans on that cold December day at Cape Lookout was lucky (although they may not agree). We were able to put a blanket over the birds, restrain them, disentangle them, and had the heart-warming joy of watching them fly away unencumbered. We recovered approximately 75 feet of fishing line from the pelicans, an end of which was attached to a lure.

We at the NC Maritime Museum and Duke Marine Lab, in cooperation with local individuals, colleagues and businesses, are attempting to address this problem by starting a Monofilament Recovery and Recycling program in Carteret County. We hope to model it after the good work that has already been done in Florida and are currently seeking funds and volunteers. Feel free to contact me to lend support. In addition, a wealth of information can be found at fishinglinerecycling.org.

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(Note: One way to support the Monofilament Recovery and Recycling program is to purchase an NC Maritime Museum special "Protect Wild Dolphins" license plate. Funds from these special plates support the museum's research, conservation and education programs, demonstrate your interest in protecting dolphins and their habitat, and make your car look better! For an application for this plate, go to your local license plate agency and/or contact the NCDMV at 919-861-3575 or visit capelookoutstudies.org.) ★