

# AGAINST THE CURRENT



MELISSA MCGAW / NCWRC

The John E. Pechmann Fishing Education Center carries on the legacy of a man who always looked to the future and whose efforts were crucial to the education center's creation.

WRITTEN BY Mike Humphries



MELISSA MCGAW / NCWRC



JODIE OWEN / NCWRC

Had it not been for the efforts of a man devoted to conserving fish and wildlife resources and educating youth about those resources, the John E. Pechmann Fishing Education Center likely never would have happened. The story of how the center, which was formerly the Fayetteville Fish Hatchery, became what it is today is a fitting legacy for the man who worked tirelessly to help create it.

Sadly, Pechmann passed away in 2006 at the age of 57 before the facility officially opened. A prominent Fayetteville attorney with a passion for the outdoors, Pechmann was actively involved in this community, having been appointed to the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission in 1993 and named chairman in 1999. He served four terms in that capacity, using that time not only to further the goals of the commission but also to create what would become the center ultimately named in his honor.

## THE LONG VIEW

The story of the center goes back to the 1920s, when the first ponds were dug at the hatchery. Through the decades, the Fayetteville Fish Hatchery dutifully fulfilled its role, until it was superseded by the Watha Hatchery, which was purchased by the state in 1992.

Following the transfer of warm-water fish production to Watha, the Fayetteville Fish Hatchery was taken offline, and the property was used simply as a depot for state-owned equipment. This could have been the end of the story for the hatchery had it not been for both the vision of Pechmann and an event held by the local chapter of Ducks Unlimited.

"A joke might actually be where this all began," says Lee Warren, a longtime friend of Pechmann and a former state chairman of Ducks Unlimited. He tells a story about Greenwings, a segment of Ducks Unlimited focused on youth 17 years old and under.



“The first year I was chairman, we decided to do a Greenwings event for the kids with bluebird nesting box building, archery, etc. After a year or two, someone suggested we do a fishing event.”

The first Greenwings event was held at a local facility with a few ponds. “It was a beautiful place, and we had great fun, but of the 110 kids who attended, not a single one caught a fish!” Warren explained. At the after-event meeting, someone half jokingly said that if they wanted to catch fish, they should have the next event at the old hatchery.

“A light went off in my head at this point,” said Warren. Recognizing that this was a pretty good idea, Warren mentioned that he knew Pechmann and would talk to him about it. A quick phone call later, Pechmann said he would bring it up at the next commissioners’ meeting in Raleigh. “I got a call from him right after the meeting, and he told me they all thought it was a great idea,” Warren said.



#### A SERIOUS RESPONSE

What had started as an offhand joke turned into a highly successful first event on the hatchery grounds, with 270 kids attending and Pechmann showing up as well. “It was a grand event, and I think it helped John decide to follow through on a desire of his to make the facility an education center designed to get

kids involved in fishing,” Warren said. “He mentioned to me that this was a great way to show to the commission what this place could do.”

Recognizing its potential after the success of the Greenwings events, the commission began to look differently at the former hatchery. In fact, the facility itself began to host its own events. In 1997, the facility hosted the first Cooperative Fish for Fun event for youth anglers, setting the trend for the future of the place.

However, there was something looming at the time that threatened to derail the whole promise of the facility. Around 2000, there were rumblings about a plan to build a bypass around Fayetteville that would ultimately plow right through the property on which the hatchery was situated.

Once again, Pechmann stepped in and played a significant role. He put in a call to the

state secretary of transportation to see if there were any alternatives. After a bit of discussion, the Department of Transportation altered its plans in recognition of the importance of the facility.

#### BEHIND THE SCENES

“Mr. Pechmann was a facilitator. He made sure that the right people were brought together, and then he would step back and let it happen,” states Kris Smith, director of the John E. Pechmann Fishing Education Center.

Having really begun to focus on a concrete plan for the future of the facility as an education center around 2001–2002, Pechmann started getting the proper people involved in the process. “He really helped create the original partnerships that made things happen,” Smith stated.

Through a combined effort of the Wildlife Commission, Ducks Unlimited, Fayetteville-Cumberland Parks and Recreation, and local government, Pechmann got all the right folks on board to get the project rolling. Over the course of the next few years, details were hammered out as to what exactly the facility would become. During 2002–2003, the official decision was made to turn it into an education center.

After that point, the process dealt with what the facility would be like. Pechmann had expressed some interest in there being a building overlooking the ponds, and this was incorporated into the design.

In 2005, the commission voted unanimously to name the facility after him. “He was both honored and humbled by having his name put on the facility,” says Warren.

“He did not like so much fuss being made over him, but he appreciated the gesture very much. He would want everyone to know that it was not about him, but about teaching people about our outdoor resources.”

Ultimately, the facility was approved in 2006 with a budget of \$1.2 million, and construction began shortly thereafter, taking about one year from start to finish. The facility officially opened in November 2007.

#### CARRYING ON

Although John Pechmann was unable to see the finished facility, his family has filled in for him every step of the way. “Since his passing in 2006, the family has been involved in every element of the center, from its dedication to the events we hold,” says Smith. In fact, Smith held a private event for the family in the facility before its opening.

“Every time I go out there, I feel comfort. I can feel his presence around me when I am there,” says Amy Pechmann, John’s widow. “He would be so honored by this center that is named after him.” She says that she is in contact with Smith so often about the center that he has practically become part of their family.

And the family is very happy with how the center has developed in regard to John’s vision. “Would he be happy with what the center has become? Absolutely, without a doubt,” states Greg Pechmann, John’s brother. His sister, Anne Mitchell, agrees: “It is everything John would have wanted it to be.”

#### FULFILLMENT OF THE VISION

Situated on about 40 acres of land with 10 fishing ponds packed with largemouth bass, channel catfish and a variety of sunfish species, the center is a wonderful resource for fishing enthusiasts both young and old.

The building itself, overlooking the ponds, is an impressive facility constructed of timber, steel and stone. Measuring in at around 4,200 square feet, the center has an airy design with vaulted ceilings and large, open rooms.

In the main entryway in the central foyer of the facility is a selection of interactive learning exhibits. Upon entering the foyer, a visitor encounters the exhibit “Tools of the Trade—Fishing 101.” It features representations of various lures and baits that anglers would use to bring in their favorite catch, with an interactive quiz that asks which ones are best for particular types of fish. It also has three reel simulators designed to replicate the weight of 2-pound, 10-pound and 20-pound fish.

The second exhibit, titled “The Watershed Connection,” is an interactive exhibit that combines a map of North Carolina with electronic graphics of the state’s 17 river basins and the various fish that inhabit them. Visitors can select a species of fish from a list, and the basins in which it can be caught light up.

Across from these interactive exhibits is “Moments in Time,” an underwater diorama that illustrates how our fishing techniques appear to the fish. In the center of the entranceway a large redbreast sunfish display shows the fish in detail and also features a cutaway anatomy section. Smith points out that this exhibit would be particularly appreciated by Pechmann, as this fish was his passion.

#### WORKING THROUGH

In addition to the exhibits, the facility also features a large classroom that can accommodate up to 100 students. “This classroom is a key element and serves as a jumping-off point for the whole purpose of the facility,” says Bob Curry, chief of the Wildlife Commission’s Division of Inland Fisheries. “This facility is all about teaching kids about fishing and the outdoors and then taking them out to the ponds to practice what they learned, exactly as John envisioned. We provide them with the tools and the opportunity.”

In fact, he pointed out that the John E. Pechmann Fishing Education Center has just about everything needed to accomplish these goals—except staff. “We provide the facility and everything budding anglers need, including bait. But we could not provide these

Events held at the center range from the Wounded Warriors program (below) to large events open to the public (bottom).



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The building overlooking the ponds of the fishing education center is home to several learning exhibits as well as a large classroom. One of the exhibits (top) features representations of lures and baits as well as reel simulators, while another (above) features an underwater diorama.

opportunities without the hard work of all our dedicated volunteers,” he continued.

Al Kittredge, one of the facility’s regular volunteers, is a perfect example. Having worked with the fly-fishing program for seven years, he has been around for a large part of the development of the education center. And, having taken on the role of volunteer coordinator, Al knows how things are run there. “I am blessed to have a cadre of volunteers that I have assembled over the years who make me look good,” Al says. “Without the volunteers, the programs here would not be possible.”

Smith agrees, stating that “the Pechmann center is a lean-running operation. With such a small staff, we really rely on our volunteers.” Small offices for the director and his staff are located on the opposite side of the building from the classroom.

Once you step out of the building, you look down on ponds totaling 6 acres, with lots of area for anglers to cast a line into the water. One of the larger ponds features a universally accessible fishing deck that accommodates wheelchair-bound fishermen.

### REACHING OUT

Combining the efforts of the small staff and a host of motivated volunteers, the center in the last year has put on 59 events attended by more than 7,000 people. Of those, more than 4,000 were children. The activities held at the center fall into three main categories—public, school and specialized events.

The public events are just that—events for which the facility is opened to the public. These popular events can draw large numbers of people to the center. Held most often on Saturdays, these include family-oriented events such as the Mother/Child Fishing Day on the Saturday before Mother’s Day and

the Father/Child Fishing Day on the Saturday before Father’s Day.

The Youth Fishing Day is so far the facility’s most popular event and focuses on helping kids learn about fishing. This event on the first Saturday in June gives young people an opportunity to really practice the sport. The center provides loaner reels if needed and starter tackle boxes fully stocked with lures and weights.

Quite fittingly, Ducks Unlimited still holds its annual Greenwings event at the center, usually the second Sunday in September. “This is where it started, and I think it is great that the events are still held here,” says Warren. And they are huge, with last year’s event totaling more than 1,300 participants, 520 of them kids. “This has easily been one of our largest events here,” Smith recalls. “There was not an empty spot around the ponds.”

Another event that Smith feels is very important is the National Hunting and Fishing Day, held on the fourth Saturday in September. “We had the property all decked out with tents filled with wildlife and learning exhibits for kids. This event proved to be a great opportunity for us to focus on what the commission does,” says Smith. Kids were given a “passport” to take with them from tent to tent that had a list of questions they needed to get answered. “This really got them involved and asking questions,” Smith continues. “It was a huge success, and I think next year’s will be even bigger.”

### A SHARPER FOCUS

In addition to the public events, the center also hosts school groups. A natural fit for the education center, these school group visits allow teachers to plan field trips for their kids that teach them the ins and outs of aquatic

habitats, fish biology and anatomy, and conservation. Also of note is the fact that all the classes at the center meet standard school curriculum requirements. After some classroom time learning the basics of fishing, the kids are given the chance to go down to the ponds and give it a try, with equipment and bait provided free.

However, not all the happenings at the Pechmann Center are general-knowledge events. In its specialized events category, the center hosts a wide variety of classes and events, ranging from four fly-fishing clinics held in late winter to Boy Scout events at which youth have the opportunity to earn the fishing and fly-fishing badges and learn how to catch and cook a fish right there. One of the newest specialized events is the Wounded Warriors program, which allows wounded soldiers to take classes on fly-fishing at the facility.

### DESERVED LEGACY

Would Pechmann be satisfied with what the center named in his honor has to offer? From people acquainted with him, the answer seems to be a resounding “Yes.”

“I think that John would be very pleased; it fulfills his vision for introducing the next generation to fishing and the outdoors,” says Inland Fisheries chief Curry.

And this opinion carries through to those who knew him best. “He would be so proud,” says Amy Pechmann, holding back tears. “I know that he would be honored and humbled by what it has become. This is exactly what he would have wanted.”

*Mike Humphries is managing editor of Wildlife in North Carolina magazine.*



MELISSA MCGAW / NCWRC

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Kris Smith, Director  
John E. Pechmann Fishing  
Education Center  
7489 Raeford Road  
Fayetteville, NC 28304  
(910) 868-5003  
kris.smith@ncwildlife.org  
www.ncwildlife.org

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