

HOOKED! On Learning



Each summer across America there are fishing derbies, fish fries and lots of fishing stories. Did you hear the one about the professor who caught 20 sharks on a longline? Actually, that's a true story and comes from the Chincoteague Bay Field Station (CBFS) at Wallops Island, located on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. For non-fishermen, a longline uses baited hooks placed at intervals off the main fishing line.

"I always get sharks on my longline, but never before have I caught so many," said Dr. Dominique Didier, biology professor at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. "Most were Atlantic sharpnose sharks, all about 1 meter long (a little more than 3 feet) and weigh 4-6 kg (around 9-13 lbs.), but we did get a few sandbar sharks, which were larger and they were a challenge to handle."

Didier was teaching marine ichthyology, and she and her biology students collected data, such as length and weight, on the shark population. "For the most part we set them all free," said Didier. "For a while it's madness on deck as we are pulling in shark after shark and then setting them back in the ocean. But it's wonderful to hold such a magnificent and powerful animal, look in its eyes and see its intelligence and make that connection to a wild animal."

The main difference from working on an island to being in the classroom is the pace. "Basically it's all-day teaching with lectures, field work and lab work. The best thing is that I can give a lecture on fish, and then we go out on the boat and catch and examine those same fish," said Didier. "The small classes at CBFS give students a rare opportunity to learn in the classroom and immediately make connections between the classroom and the field. It's a truly hands-on learning environment."

More than 45 years ago, Millersville University was one of the founding university members of the CBFS, which focuses on research and learning about the marine and coastal ecosystems of the mid-Atlantic coast. "It's great to see how the place has grown from just offering college courses to now hosting summer camps, school programs, intergenerational camps and programs, and adult education, as well as hosting meetings and public lectures," explained Didier.