Professor's tiny salamander is a big discovery

ECU News Service

Thursday, August 20, 2009

East Carolina University professor Trip Lamb played a part in discovering the first new genus of salamander to be described in North America in 50 years.

Lamb shares credit for discovering a new genus of salamander, called the “patch nosed salamander” for the yellow patch on its snout, from the southern Appalachian Mountains.

The new species, at 25-26 millimeters, is one of the smallest in the United States.

Lamb, a professor in the department of biology at ECU, co-authored an article in the September issue of the Journal of Zoology that describes the new genus and species of lungless salamander.

"One of the more remarkable things about this new salamander is that it occurs right here in the United States, opposed to some remote tropical locale, and in the Appalachian Mountains, a region well known for its salamander diversity and one well studied by biologists," Lamb said. "Yet this species eluded discovery until 2007."

Lamb said the salamander is so small because its size allows it to fill a hole in its environment that other salamanders can not.

There are other salamanders in the Southeast United States in the general size range of the patch nosed salamander and some in South America that are even smaller.

"By decreasing in size you can do something different that other salamanders can not do," Lamb said. "The small size permits these salamanders to do something ecologically that the more typical sized salamanders are unable to do."

There are about 500 species of salamanders around the world and North Carolina has a high species count with nearly 60, Lamb said.

Graduate students Bill Peterman of the University of Missouri and Joe Milanovich of the University of Georgia found the tiny salamander. They are the co-authors of the study with Lamb.

Ecologist J.C. Maerz, Milanovich's major professor at UGA, herpetologist Carlos Camp at Piedmont College, who performed the initial identification and David Wake at the University of California-Berkley, a comparative anatomist and an expert on lungless salamanders, also contributed to the discovery.

The graduate students, who are friends, originally found the salamander in a rural area of northeast Georgia. The salamander has been since found in two counties in northeast Georgia and one county in South Carolina.

Lamb, an evolutionary biologist, was contacted by Camp to help with the initial identification as more facts pointed to a new species.

"I first compared DNA sequences from the new salamander with those of several brook salamanders and related genera," Lamb said.

Lamb said he was stunned when the salamander fell outside of the classification of brook salamanders.
Wake, an expert on lungless salamanders, was called in after Lamb's sequencing showed high levels of genetic divergence in comparison to the brook salamanders. The scientists were preparing to describe a new genus.

"Discovering something like this is luck of the draw," Lamb said. "It's a matter of serendipity that these guys found this salamander. And describing a species new to science is pretty exciting."

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Hurricane may cause rough seas off coast

By Ginger Livingston
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, August 20, 2009

Deadly rip currents, high waves and sharks. It sounds like the Discovery channel, but it's actually what's going on along the North Carolina coast.

Hurricane Bill, the category 3 storm ushering in the hurricane season, will remain far from the state this weekend, but the National Weather Service is predicting wave-generated erosion along the Outer Banks, especially north of Cape Lookout.

Wave heights of 10 feet are predicted in the surf zone, said Casey Dail, meteorologist with the National Weather Service office in Newport. The wave peak is expected Saturday night.

Along with waves, rip currents will remain a hazard this weekend, she said.

"At this point in time we don't know how bad the rip currents are going to be," said Fire Chief Adam Snyder of the Atlantic Beach Fire Department. People visiting the beach this weekend should go to locations monitored by lifeguards, he said.

If waves reach the predicted 10-foot height, red flags warning people to leave the water will be posted, he said.

Despite rough coastal waters, there's no chance of flooding along the sounds and rivers, Dail said.

And then there are the sharks.

A freelance photographer's images of a large school of sharks off Fort Macon earlier in the week has sent shudders through beachgoers.

Scientists say it appears the animals are blacktip and blacknose sharks, a species that usually weighs less than 100 pounds and prefers Spanish mackerel and bluefish to humans.

"It's an interesting and unusual picture," said Roger Rulifson, senior scientist at East Carolina University's Institute for Coastal Science and Policy and professor with the Department of Biology. Sharks are common along the North Carolina coast. They are usually not visible because the state's waters are usually murky because of runoff.

"Why all the sharks are close to the beach ... it would be interesting to go down there and sample the water," Rulifson said. He suspects large schools of bait fish have schooled closer to the coast, drawing the sharks with them.

Rulifson said his research suggests when bad weather roughens coastal waters, fish will seek out deeper, more stable waters further offshore and sharks will follow their food source. However, anyone planning on surfing this weekend is advised to use caution and remember that sharks feed during dusk and dawn.

Atlantic Beach's Snyder offers a similar warning.

"People should still come down and enjoy the beach, it's going to be a nice weekend," he said. "Just be careful when you get in the water."

Contact Ginger Livingston at glivingston@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9570.

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Retired NC university head Sullivan dies of cancer

The Associated Press

Thursday, August 20, 2009

GREENSBORO, N.C. — The retired head of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has died after a two-year battle with pancreatic cancer.

The university said former chancellor Patricia Sullivan died Thursday at age 69. She had been living in a Greensboro hospice.

Sullivan led the campus for 13 years before retiring in July 2008. She led UNCG as its enrollment expanded by a third to more than 17,000 students. She is credited with building the university’s campus facilities and academic programs.

Sullivan was succeeded last August by chancellor Linda Brady, who was a top administrator at the University of Oregon.

Sullivan is survived by her husband, Dr. Charles W. Sullivan.

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A sampling of editorials from NC newspapers

The Associated Press

Wednesday, August 19, 2009

UNC reining in "retreat" salaries

N. C. State University’s ex-chancellor, James Oblinger, took a substantial pay cut recently, feeling the full brunt of a UNC Board of Governors reeling from a public backlash against generous "retreat" salaries for top university officials.

The board did the right thing with Oblinger’s pay, and is moving in the right direction in curtailing the retreat leave policy that has been extended to many officials as they stepped down from top jobs.

But, as system President Erskine Bowles has cautioned even as he has urged a stricter policy, the system must be careful not to erode its ability to seek bright and talented candidates sought with equal fervor by peer institutions.

NCCU Chancellor Charlie Nelms, for example, told the board recently he would not have left the Indiana University system were it not for the "retreat rights" policy.

At issue is a university practice that allows presidents and other high-ranking officials to step down from their administrative posts and maintain their executive salaries, often for a year, as they transition to a teaching role again as professors.

That is not an unusual practice at major universities.

Several problems have beset UNC, however.

First and foremost, the practice seems to have become so deeply embedded that it reaches into the ranks to cover provost and even some deans. That seems profligate, to say the least.

Second, the largesse was extended even to someone like Oblinger, who resigned under pressure and under a cloud for his role in the controversial, and since repudiated, hiring of Mary Easley, wife of the former governor.

Finally, and perhaps politically most devastating, the pay packages — brought to increased scrutiny by the Oblinger case — came to light as the economy was nosediving and many hard-working North Carolina taxpayers saw their jobs eliminated, with scarcely any significant benefit at all.

And universities have been laying off staff, curtailing job searches and postponing projects to absorb the impact of declining state revenues. Six-figure salaries for university leaders in what to many appears the laid-back transition period rankles deeply in those circumstances.

Bowles and the board of governors moved to curtail the retreat practice, to demand greater accountability in establishing those packages and to look for a more straightforward accounting of what’s expected of the transitioning experience.

Those changes are clearly overdue. They may suffice to protect an important recruiting tool from the abolition which its casual overuse has threatened.
State needs more leadership from Gov. Perdue

Gov. Beverly Perdue ascended to office on the strength of her record of public service and a promising new vision for the state. She pledged greater openness than her predecessor and a sound plan for guiding the state through a difficult economic year, one that would protect education spending.

In the months since, even her most fervent campaign supporters cannot be pleased with her performance by those measures. North Carolina needs the governor to be a stronger, more forthright leader, and for Perdue to meet the expectations that come with holding the state’s highest office.

It was thought that the contentious battle over the state budget ended on Aug. 7, when the governor signed the $19 billion spending plan that emerged from weeks of negotiation. She expressed reservations about the budget, concerns shared by many others across the state, but argued it protected public education, her highest priority.

Recently, however, Perdue signed Executive Order 21 which reduced state spending by an additional 5 percent. Though several areas will be exempt from that imposition — including funds allocated for education, public health, law enforcement and economic development — the move came as a surprise to even the most astute observers of state government.

Perdue’s decision to alter the budget will add to a growing din of criticism. Her plunging poll numbers reflect a growing discomfort with her policies and a lack of leadership at a critical moment. That concern is fueled by Perdue’s uneven performance thus far, particularly in regard to the budget process.

North Carolina needed comprehensive tax reform, but Perdue did not demand it be included in the final budget even though a framework for revenue restructuring emerged from the Senate. Instead, she said that it didn’t matter what taxes the Legislature raised — a stunning misstatement when thousands are struggling to make ends meet. When a budget agreement emerged in July, she claimed to be surprised by its specifics and scuttled it.

She accepted the final budget deal, and signed it reluctantly, only to slash 5 percent from it one week later. Her spokesman subsequently argued the order will help the state overcome a temporary cash-flow problem, but that fails to explain why she would sign a budget with known flaws.

Leadership can be a difficult burden, particularly in times of strife. As William Shakespeare wrote, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.”

But Perdue asked for voters’ support in November. They ask only that she lead with confidence.

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N.C. Racial Justice Act aims at fairness

A bill with the simple aim of ensuring that sentencing for crimes is based on the law and not racial bias should not have faced difficulty getting passed. But the opponents were lined up — and influential. They included district attorneys, sheriffs, victims’ advocates and several lawmakers.

The N.C. legislature made the right call anyway. Lawmakers approved the North Carolina Racial Justice Act this session.

As Gov. Bev Perdue noted when she signed the bill into law recently: “The act ensures that when North Carolina hands down our state’s harshest punishment to our most heinous criminals — the decision is based on the facts and the law, not racial prejudice.”

That hasn’t always been the case. Condemned N.C. prisoners have been removed from death row or lengthy prison terms after racial and other equity issues were raised. At least two black death row defendants have been exonerated after prosecutorial misconduct was revealed. A 2000 investigation by The Charlotte Observer found that blacks who killed whites were three times more likely to face the death penalty than murder victims generally.
There have been allegations of racial bias across the country. White jurors were quoted as commenting in deliberations in a Lancaster, S.C., case that "the n---- had to fry." In a Randolph County case, a white juror disparaged blacks in general and asserted outlandishly that black men rape white women to brag about it.

House Speaker Joe Hackney, D-Orange, himself a lawyer, acknowledged that bias exists: "I've spent most of my life in courtrooms across North Carolina, and I have seen the subtle impact of race in our courtrooms."

This law allows judges to consider whether such racial bias played a significant role in the decision to seek or impose the death penalty. If the judge agrees it did, prosecutors could be prevented from seeking the death penalty. The judge could also overturn a death penalty on appeal and impose a life sentence.

Nothing in this law would set condemned prisoners free, as some critics claimed. Noted Rep. Larry Womble, D-Forsyth, one of the bill's sponsors: "This is about justice. ... We want the world to know that we will be fair and objective in this area."

Mecklenburg County District Attorney Peter Gilchrist said he worries that the new law would lead to unfounded claims and to more work for his overburdened prosecutors.

We understand his concerns. But workload must not be how we decide who is treated fairly and gets justice. A system of laws must be a system of laws for everyone, even those accused of the most horrible crimes. The Racial Justice Act aims to make sure it is.

From Star-News of Wilmington, Aug. 12

Higher tax credits make North Carolina more competitive

Call it a case of having to give a lot to get a lot more. The higher film incentives approved by the N.C. General Assembly will be worth it if they reinvigorate the state's movie industry.

Yes, it's a bittersweet pill to swallow. Tax incentives in general tend to look and smell like bribes handed out at taxpayers' expense. In some cases, industries have held out for incentives before committing to North Carolina, even if it seemed clear they had no intention of going elsewhere.

The tax credits approved recently are based on the amount of money productions spend in North Carolina — money that pours into the economy and helps businesses' bottom lines, boosts sales tax revenues and helps provide jobs far beyond the scope of a movie set.

But as long as other states — and in this global economy, other nations — dangle tax incentives in front of prospective employers, North Carolina has little choice but to join in the game and play to win.

For years Wilmington enjoyed a strong reputation as "Wimywood," with the nation's most active film industry outside of Los Angeles and New York. That was before other states, as well as places like Canada and New Zealand, began luring productions with more and more generous offers.

North Carolina offered 15 percent. Other states offer 25 percent or more. Georgia, which recently stole a production away from Wilmington, offers 30 percent.

What next? Will other states go for 35 percent? Forty percent? Where will it stop?

But in an effort to get more cameras rolling here again, to put the hundreds of people who depend on the film industry for a job back to work, to get production companies to spend their money in the Cape Fear region and throughout North Carolina, the Honorables had to act.

Members of our local legislative delegation helped persuade their fellow Honorables that all of North Carolina benefits when productions choose to film anywhere within the state.

The Cape Fear region, however, reaps much of the bounty.

In 2007 and 2008, the film industry spent $155 million in Wilmington alone — more than half of what was spent statewide. Those figures don't include the other businesses that benefited from the presence of productions here,
or what crew members and the cast spent.

But it doesn’t take much to snatch those productions and their money away.

A major film starring tween favorite Miley Cyrus was within inches of coming to Wilmington when the production company abruptly announced it got a better offer from Georgia. Adding insult to injury, the announcement came the same day Gov. Beverly Perdue was in town to announce that the movie would film here.

That hurt more than community pride. The big-budget production will be distributing its many dollars in the Peach State instead of among Tar Heels. Some crew members who live in the Wilmington area have gotten work out of it, but Georgia will get the income tax on their earnings.

But North Carolina has other advantages, too: a ready supply of skilled film workers and the boast-worthy Dream Stage 10, at EUE/Screen Gems. The new incentives should more than level the playing field.

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All 78 medical students in new class are from N.C.

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Friday, August 14, 2009

A white coat ceremony welcomed a new class of medical students to the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University on Friday afternoon.

The 78 students — 39 males and 39 females — officially began their medical school experience at the ceremony in the auditorium at the Brody School of Medicine. About 200 friends and family attended.

This is the largest class in the history of the medical school — and all of them are residents of North Carolina, including eight from Pitt County.

"It is your uniform, your entry ticket to serve a noble profession," Dr. Virginia Hardy, senior associate dean of academic affairs, told the students about the white coats that were placed on them by senior members of the Brody faculty.

"Allow it to connect you to a service as old as history," Hardy said.

Dr. Harry Adams, professor of medicine, gave the keynote address.

"Be diligent and do the right thing," Adams said. "You can be the brightest doctor in the world, but if you are not diligent and you do not do the right thing, you will be doing your patients a disservice."

Adams said that medical school will be a time of experience and adventure for the students at Brody.

"You are going to look back and you are going to say that was an amazing time," he said.

He encouraged the students to take advantage of programs that send 25 percent of the school's medical students abroad for at least a month in developing countries where they learn how medicine is administered in different cultures.

"We hope that you will be the healers of your communities and that you will represent the Brody School of Medicine in a very good way," Hardy said.

The 78 students will begin classes on Monday, but their coats will not get much use until the third year. However, the symbolic nature of the coat will stay with the students throughout their time at the school, Dr. David Collier of the Department of Pediatrics said.

"The white coat is a visible symbol of our confidence in you," Collier said.

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Colleges sniff at military training

Pressure is on to allow credit

BY ALAN SCHER ZAGIER, The Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. - Twelve years of military service left Donald Spradling highly trained in satellite imagery, nuclear engineering and foreign intelligence analysis. None of that made a difference to the University of Missouri.

When the fall semester begins next week, the 33-year-old father of five will be taking largely introductory courses with the rest of the school’s freshmen.

"I'm going to be studying things I already learned all over again," the Navy veteran said.

Nearly half a million veterans are expected on college campuses this year as part of the new GI Bill. The surge is leading to a call for schools to re-examine their policies of declining to grant college credit for military training and service.

An estimated one in five colleges and universities do not give academic credit for military education, according to a recent survey of 723 schools by the American Council on Education. Even more of the schools, 36 percent, said they don't award credit for military occupational training.

That can mean spending more on tuition, stretching financial aid or GI Bill scholarships and delaying a student's entry into the work force.

Missouri Chancellor Brady Deaton said the school considers most military preparation "experiential learning." He noted that individual academic departments can choose to award credit on their own.

"It may be very practical skills acquisition, but that may not be what university education sets out to do," he said.

Many college-bound veterans said military recruiters often offer an unrealistic portrayal of what awaits in academia, suggesting their military coursework and training will count for college credit.

Derek Blumke, a six-year Air Force veteran, helped found Student Veterans of America, a group that plans to push for greater acceptance of military credit. At the University of Michigan, which he attends, some military coursework -- such as foreign language study -- is accepted for credit. Other work is not.

"There needs to be a standard format set up," said Blumke. "There are tens of thousands of
vets coming home who aren't receiving the credit they deserve because the proper protocol isn't in place."

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A subsidiary of The McClatchy Company
For class of 2009, degree doesn’t mean a job
Fewer than a fifth of graduating seniors even have offers, research finds
By Alex Johnson
Reporter
msnbc.com
updated 7:16 a.m. ET Aug. 21, 2009

Matt Dumont has been looking for work since May.

“I’ve had a couple times that I was told that I was one of the top applicants, went in for an interview, and then I just never heard back from them,” said Dumont, who graduated last spring from Abilene Christian University in Texas with a degree in English and minors in Spanish and the Bible.

Dumont was haunting the college’s Career Center last week, looking for leads and advice. But the prospects are not promising for him and thousands of other new college graduates: Employment counselors and job placement specialists say the class of 2009 faces a daunting task finding work in the worst economy since the Great Depression.

Labor statistics for July showed that 15.3 percent of Americans ages 20 to 24 were unemployed, up a tenth of a percentage point from June. That’s compared to the overall jobless rate of 9.4 percent.

Those figures don’t indicate how many were recent college graduates, but surveys by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, a professional organization of career counselors at more than 2,000 U.S. colleges and universities, show that the recession has been particularly tough on those entering the job market with a college degree.

More than half of graduates in the class of 2007 had job offers in hand when they finished school, the association said. That figure dropped to one-quarter of 2008 graduates — after the recession began in December 2007 — and for the class of 2009, it was fewer than one-fifth.

Graduates ‘frustrated,’ ‘scared’
Projections for the class of 2010 won’t be final until the fall, but the association said the picture next spring was likely to be even worse.

It’s no surprise, then, that this year’s graduates are “frustrated” and “scared,” said Peter Perkins, director of career services at the State University of New York Institute of Technology in Utica, N.Y.

“They’ve been searching and haven’t found anything and aren’t sure when that’s going to turn around,” he said.

In an annual survey of college seniors released last month by Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, this year’s graduating seniors were markedly more pessimistic about their job prospects than in years past.

Charles Wilf, the Duquesne economist who conducted the research, said only 45 percent of respondents in the national study felt “good or very good” about their chances of getting a job — down by 20 full percentage points from last year’s class.

Public service looks better and better
That’s because top graduates aren’t competing only with the top performers of their own class, said Zeidy Cabrera, employer relations coordinator at California State University at Los Angeles. They’re also battling for fewer available jobs against millions of experienced workers who’ve been laid off.

As a result, more graduates are looking at alternatives to going to work.
“I have a lot of friends who are either moving abroad or trying to find different things, because with the recession, people can’t find jobs,” said Sydney Owens, who graduated from the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Virginia in May.

Owens herself took an internship for the summer and then was heading off to Africa — “I’m going to Tanzania to volunteer” she said.

Volunteering and public service programs are turning out to be popular options, and they’re reporting a significant spike in applications from graduates.

Applications for the Peace Corps were up by 16 percent this spring over last year, the agency reported; likewise, applications for AmeriCorps, the domestic analogue to the Peace Corps, have more than tripled from 2008, it said. Most of the applicants were recent college graduates or college seniors about to graduate.

At Teach for America, which places top graduates in two-year entry-level teaching jobs, 35,000 young people — more than two-thirds of them recent college graduates — applied for roughly 4,000 available positions for the coming school year. For the first time in its 20-year history, it said, the program had to reject prospects who met all of its rigorous criteria.

“The economy probably does have something to do with it,” said Gary Beaulieu, director of career services at Butler University in Indianapolis. “Students are looking for something to do, kind of delaying the entrance into the workforce.”

And while most public service applicants are sincere about wanting to give back to the community, Beaulieu said, it doesn’t hurt that “it looks good on a résumé, as well.”

**Some seniors cling to alma mater**
Others are postponing their careers in another way, choosing to extend the security of college life until bad times blow over.

In a survey of college students by The Associated Press and the college TV network mtvU, nearly 1 in 5 said in May that they had changed their plans this year and expected to attend graduate or professional school because they feared that an undergraduate degree wouldn’t be enough to secure a job.

Final data aren’t yet available, but the Council of Graduate Schools reported that applications for graduate schools were noticeably up this year, by as much as 20 percent at some institutions.

Meanwhile, Kaplan Inc., which helps students study for graduate school admissions exams, found that 40 percent of students who took the Law School Admissions Test in February said the recession was a factor in their decisions to apply to law school.

“Recessions often inspire people to look to law school to ride out the storm, transition into a new field or broaden their education to make themselves a more attractive candidate,” said Jeff Thomas, the company’s director of pre-law programs.

**For top graduates, bitter advice**
For those who can’t afford to put off going to work, college career centers are popular places. But Cabrera, the adviser at Cal State-Los Angeles, said there was only so much help counselors could offer.

“All we can do right now is give them hope, give them job leads, give them advice on their résumés,” she said.

Often, that advice isn’t necessarily what students want to hear, said Tom Gimbel, chief executive of the LaSalle Network, a staffing and recruiting firm in Chicago. Even top performers face the prospect of taking jobs far less glamorous than they had envisioned.

“The days of kids coming out of college with liberal arts degrees that want to make $50,000 to $60,000 or
even $40,000 to $45,000” are over, Gimbel said.

“You have to start at the bottom,” he said, “We’re kind of back to the ’50s and the ’60s — start in the mailroom and work your way up.”

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