

'Cowboys' captures the flavor of Southeastern North Carolina

By Ben Steelman
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Take about a fifth of Jimmy Buffet, a jigger of Carl Hiaasen and a heapin' helping of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Shake, don't stir, and you'll come up with one serving of *Saltwater Cowboys*, a comic Down East novel by North Carolina boy Bill Morris.

A saltwater cowboy is a coastal good ol' boy, who works on a boat, probably fishes with a net – the way Jesus did, he'll be quick to remind you – prefers beer to Chardonnay and probably showers every other Saturday, whether he needs it or not.

Thanks to coastal development, he's nearly as endangered a species as the bright-leaf tobacco farmer or the North Carolina textile hand. In *Saltwater Cowboys*, though, the good guys get to fight back.

As our story opens, somebody has been dumping live sea turtles in the most inconvenient places: a hotel Jacuzzi, a country club swimming pool, even the mayor's pickup.

Lawmen suspect the culprit or culprits come from Croaker Neck, a Carteret County backwater where “the only real tourist attraction in town is listening to people talk funny.” (There is no Croaker Neck on the map, although it resembles Harkers Island.)

Caught in the middle is Dodge Lawson, a college boy gone to seed and the grandson of a pioneer marine biologist. Now, he makes a living with his granddaddy's old boat, rescuing turtles and towing them out to sea – mostly so he can stay close to Ilse, his lost love, who heads up the local “turtle-hugger” society.

Complicating matters is the arrival of a New York movie-maker with the Dickensian name of Will Shutterspeed and more than a passing resemblance to Michael Moore. Shutterspeed and his drop-dead-gorgeous girlfriend are out to make an art-house flick about the Lost Colony (which many Down Easters believe was actually on Cedar Island, not Roanoke). Still, they don't mind detouring into a documentary about the local eco-protest.

As an environmental tract, *Saltwater Cowboys* takes the side of commercial fishermen, cruising past such issues as overfishing and bycatch. Recreational anglers are caricatured as members of the “Suburban Conservation Council.” Their leaders churn the water in diesel-smoking, battlewagon-sized yachts, scheming to rid the seas of blue-collar riffraff who get in the way of their beloved marlins.

The real enemy, Mr. Morris suggests, are mega-developers, tearing up the old dunes and duck blinds, building condos and sewer systems clear to the water.

A long-time writer for *Our State* and *Wildlife* in North Carolina, Mr. Morris suffers many of the pitfalls of the first-time novelist. He has a little trouble getting his plot jump-started, and his characters tend to talk in multi-page monologues more often than they should. He also never quite resolves his attitudes toward *Monkey Wrench Gang* eco-sabotage. (We know he's thinking of Mr. Abbey's book since characters in *Saltwater Cowboys* mention it by name.) Is it a harmless prank, a justified response by little guys who've had the political system rigged against them – or is it a potentially dangerous

crime?

Saltwater Cowboys, however, succeeds in capturing the flavor of its region, and it gives a voice to folks who don't get their words into fancy print all that often. Dingbatters (the Outer Banks term for outsiders and touristas) should find it amusing and instructive.