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Course tackles marine issues

By **DOUG FRASER**
STAFF WRITER

Tora Johnson's grandfather was a fisherman, and her husband has been fishing in Alaska for 20 years. She's taught at the College of the Atlantic and the University of Maine.

She is also the author of a book that navigates the treacherous straits between two groups that often clash: environmentalists trying to save the right whale and fishermen trying to make a living.

With that background, Johnson seemed the ideal choice to lead a semester-long course at Cape Cod Museum of Natural History that examines how to find solutions to conflict involving marine issues.

Museum director Dick Wheeler said he read Johnson's book, "Entanglements: The Intertwined Fates of Whales and Fishermen," and thought the message of compromise and trust would make a good winter seminar to follow the success of last winter's course on Stellwagen Bank.

"So many books leave you with that 'what can I do' feeling, but she goes for practical solutions," Wheeler said. "She's a strong person, a strong scientist and a very good writer."

The program runs from today to May 23, meeting every other week for three hours of panel discussion with experts.

The topics are controversial and in the news. They include saving the North Atlantic right whale, the fight over New England groundfish, fisheries management, the impact of Navy sonar on marine mammals, and commercial whaling.

The course can be taken for credit through Framingham State College's continuing education program. Last year's course drew 80 to 100 people, including teachers, graduate students and others in the marine field seeking credit or professional development, Wheeler said. It is also open to the public on a noncredit basis for \$10 per session.

Almost all the topics are hotly contested, but panelists have been told the discussions are not debates. "It's not about who's right or wrong, but about what brings you to the table," Johnson said. "Where do you see the conflicts and how do we move beyond it."

The model of building trust lies in the right whale debate. With environmentalists and lobstermen squaring off, the Yarmouth-based International Fund for Animal Welfare approached fishermen and asked what could be done.

IFAW and the Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association agreed that finding and pulling up "ghost gear," abandoned pots and lines, would be a good start. IFAW put up the money; lobstermen the effort.

Johnson hopes her course, which got some IFAW funding, will show that empathy can lead to creative solutions.

And Wheeler hopes serious courses will put the museum on the map as an institution for learning. The museum closed briefly two winters ago because of a financial and philosophical crisis over its mission.

"We erased the blackboard and rethought the whole operation. We're trying to do something that earns respect," Wheeler said.

Doug Fraser can be reached at dfraser@capecodonline.com.

If you go

■ **What:** "Saving Seas: Resolving Conflict and Finding Solutions in the Marine Realm" course

■ **When:** 6-9 p.m. every other Tuesday, today through May 23

■ **Where:** Cape Cod Museum of Natural History, Route 6A, Brewster

■ **Information:** 508-896-3867 or www.ccmnh.org