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Susan Drake, a UW-Madison doctoral student, is shown here on Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay. Drake organized a weekend meeting on the island among environmentalists, local officials and men who take crabs and oysters from the bay.

UW student preaches love of Earth

By Todd R. Svanoe

Correspondent for *The Capital Times*

UW doctoral student Susan Drake leaves Madison this week to broaden her environmental and religious crusade on Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay in Virginia.

Her mission, which began in 1997, is to strike the conscience of Chesapeake Bay watermen who for decades had been dumping bait boxes, tin cans and empty oil bottles overboard their fishing vessels, destroying the coast on which their livelihood depends.

It was a natural segue from her 1986-to-1996 stint as a U.S. environmental representative to the United Nations. Drake's work helped produce the Earth Summit. Her skills of negotiation would be needed on this assignment, too.

"The Tangier people had had a huge religious revival," she said. "They said 212 people had come to Christ out of a population of 600. Two very conservative churches commanded the loyalty of all but a handful of people."

To Drake, who was from a conservative religious background herself, the scene was

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set. She knew their language.

"Given that there was a move of the Holy Spirit on the island, I felt that if anywhere there could be openness to reconciling faith with environmental concern, it would be with this group of people," she explained.

Drake, 35, has always seen a link between Christian belief and ecological care. "Genesis 2:15 says that the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to tend and to keep it, to love, sustain and care for it," she said.

She had come to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to study with environmental studies professor Calvin DeWitt, who integrates "biblical principles of ecology" into his teaching, she said.

The Bible, for example, prescribes Sabbath day rests for the land and the people who cultivate it, said Drake. That ethic stood in stark contrast to that of many Tangier people who worked endlessly, justified keeping undersized crabs, smuggled pots past inspec-

tors and prepared them in cheaper, less sanitary ways. Their rape of the land had virtually eliminated their harvest of oysters, which ranked second only to crabbing on the island.

Drake hoped to create a link between the people's faith and practice. But during her initial visits, she was greeted with suspicion.

"In one meeting I was shouted down and called an Earth worshiper and a beguiler. They saw a Christian environmentalist as an oxymoron. My life was threatened twice. Someone even said, 'Can anything good come from the liberal University of Wisconsin?'"

The charred remains of a Chesapeake Bay Foundation shed on a neighboring island stood as a visible reminder of the animosity the bay harvesters had toward any environmental constraint on their shrinking industry.

That violent act came in response to a new law prohibiting the dredging of crabs at 40 feet or below, the very depth at which most islanders mined the creatures, whose number was diminishing.

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But this year, before returning for a month to Madison, a natural occurrence gave her the inroad she needed. Rare northeasterly winds brought the highest tide waters in 36 years to the doorsteps in town, delivering decades worth of garbage from the marshes into Tangier neighborhoods.

"As one woman said, God had presented them all of their sins in visual form," said Drake.

The islanders had economic reasons for listening to her, as well.

Technological advances and the forces of competition are driving fishermen out of business all around them, and they might be next. Their problems were exacerbated by infighting and competitiveness between the islands' two ultra-conservative churches, she said.

"I told them the lobstermen of Massachusetts and Maine are thriving because 20 years ago they came together and decided they weren't going to increase their technology. It's the same problem with family farmers in Wisconsin. Big business comes in, and the little guy gets pushed out. They needed to unify."

Furthermore, she claimed, they needed to put down their fists, admit their lawlessness and work with local environmental and governmental authorities toward regulations that were fair and not just punitive.

Finally, miraculously, Drake said, they began to see this researcher as a missionary sent by God to offer them an opportunity to maintain their heritage and future. They formed a church-based committee on "caring for creation." Ultimately, they allowed her to preach her message at a

rare service of the combined churches.

She charged that the pictures of Jesus watching over a fisherman that were carried on nearly every boat would do them no good. "Is it not inconsistent to call upon Jesus to pilot you through the storm, and then do to (his) creation as you will?"

The service so moved 58 of the 175 licensed watermen that they went to the altar and signed a covenant to observe fishery regulations and vowed never to harm the natural world they had been given.

"The next morning I woke up and kept looking out my window. I couldn't figure out what was different about the road," she recalled. "Then I saw a truck go by collecting trash. They had been cleaning up since 6 a.m. that morning."

In March, Drake organized a conference, attended by the island people along with 30 federal, state and local officials and led by professor DeWitt.

"Cal talked eloquently about how God had created the blue crab and described the photosynthesis process of a single blade of marsh grass," said Drake. "People were awestruck and very affected. Many were actually in tears."

Since then, island representatives have presented fishery bills on the floor of the Virginia Assembly, Drake reports proudly. And in exchange for new standards on pollution and shoreline erosion, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation has donated \$50,000 to replenish the waters with crabs and oysters.

"That cooperation is unheard of around there," she said.

Drake, who will live two hours from Tangier in Salisbury, Md., as she completes her thesis, this week makes her 19th move in 35 years. "What I'm trying to prove as an anthropologist is that you need to understand the value system of a community in order to change behavior," she said.