

## | Maritime |

# Aquaculture pioneer grows fish industry

BY ALISON LEE SATAKE

A connection to the sea runs deep in UNCW Aquaculture Facility program leader, Wade Watanabe's family. His grandparents were skilled commercial fishermen in the deep waters between the islands of Oahu and Kauai. They used long lines to fish for deep water snapper in a sampan, a Japanese fishing boat with a steep bow. "No navigational aids, no fish finders, just instincts. Pretty amazing," Watanabe said.

Now, Watanabe cultures and studies the fruits of the sea to encourage sustainability of the populations affected by modern day commercial fishing. UNCW's Aquaculture Facility on Wrightsville Beach by the municipal offices, spawns and grows Southern Flounder, Black Sea Bass and Red Porgy. It supplies eggs to local fish growers including Carolina Flounder,

located on a hog farm in Wallace and Blue Ocean Farms, that grows Black Sea Bass in Sturgeon City.

"Can you imagine if you wanted to get into fish farming? You got enamored with the concept. You saw the importance of it. So, you bought some land. Now what? How are you going to do it? Almost impossible," Watanabe said. That's where the university-based aquaculture facility can assist. "We all go up the curve together and leverage our resources and it minimizes risks to any one party."

In 1998 when Watanabe was hired to begin UNCW's Aquaculture Facility and program, fresh water aquaculture was well-established especially for trout and catfish. But, culturing marine fish was relatively new. "The marine fish species in general have more complex life cycles.



PHOTO BY ALISON LEE SATAKE

**Ocean expert:** Wade Watanabe at Wrightsville Beach grows sea bass and flounder, which spawn this month.

Breeding them in captivity, raising the larvae to juvenile stages is a lot more technically challenging than fresh water

species. That's why it's lagged behind the fresh water culture industry in general," Watanabe said.

The facility was established at an old desalination plant that the Department of Interior gave to the Town of Wrightsville Beach after the plant was closed. The stipulation for the land was that it had to be used for aquatic research. The town leases the property to the university.

The aquaculture facility received a \$66,000 grant from the North Carolina Biotechnology Center to build a larger scale hatchery. Its current hatchery produces about 10,000 Black Sea Bass fingerlings, but with the new hatchery they will be able to ramp up production to 60,000 to 70,000 fingerlings per crop. The new hatchery will open in the spring for the next Black Sea Bass spawning period.