

A Natural Combination

Ask Dr. Michael Grace what he's doing after work, and he'll probably tell you, "having fun with a few snakes or tortoises." And what does he have planned for the next day in the lab? More fun with snakes and tortoises!

In a perfect example of life imitating art, or in this case, research, Grace has discovered the secret to true happiness—uniting work time and play time in a symmetrical yin-yang balance.

"There's no clear line between work and non-work, or work and home life," he explains. "It all kind of merges into one."

Grace, associate professor of biological sciences, studies the neurobiology of animal behavior, specifically sensory systems. His research focuses on three general areas: vision, nonvisual photoreception to control biological rhythms and infrared imaging systems in snakes.

On the day of our meeting, he was feverishly working on a grant proposal involving sea turtles. His team is studying the development of vision—how the vision system changes from hatchling to adulthood—in the turtles.

Not only is this project exciting in terms of quenching the intellectual curiosity of biologists, but it may also have important implications for conservation.

"Understanding how vision works means that you can understand how human impacts influence these animals," he explains. "With the sea turtles, you could better design effective beach-front lighting legislation. What kind of lights are acceptable vs. not acceptable? What

are hatchlings capable of seeing and how do different wavelengths—different colors—of light affect their behavior?"

His enthusiasm is unmistakable.

"It's pretty fun," he adds, giddily. "You get to work with neat animals and get paid to play with



snakes and turtles and fish. It doesn't get much better than that!"

His general love of the outdoors also led to his secret "addiction"—antique wooden boats.

How It All Began

Since boyhood, Grace has been an avid outdoorsman. Growing up in central Georgia near the Oconee National Forest, he gained an early appreciation for nature and its many wonders. He also developed an early fascination with canoes, earning his first Boy Scout merit badge in canoeing.

Later, between completing his undergraduate degree and beginning his graduate studies, Grace worked on a research project in the Georgia swamps.

"I lived by myself in this little cabin on stilts in the swamps of this remote area of Georgia. My job was to travel up and down the river collecting samples and analyzing them, so I was out boating all the time."

Occasionally, a postdoctoral student who was also performing research would come down to the river in his family's old wooden canvas canoe.

"It was made of cedar and had a canvas cover on the outside to make it waterproof," Grace recalls. "It was the most gorgeous thing I had ever seen. I just fell in love with it, and I said, 'I want one of those.'"

From Pasttime to Passion

After years of searching, unsuccessfully, for a canoe similar to his first love, he decided to build his



own. Self-taught in the art of woodworking, his project was a success and sparked his desire to start another. He acquired his second specimen after placing an ad—WANTED: Old Wooden Canoe—in the local newspaper.

Since then, his collection has grown to more than 30 antique boats, ranging in year from about 1870 to 1930. He travels to antique boat shows all over the Southeast and has won a number of awards. Most recently, his 1916 17-inch Old Town Canoe Company mahogany-trimmed canoe earned Best of Show Overall from among 100 antique boats of various makes, including motorboats.

Grace says he enjoys the boat shows not so much for the competitive factor but for the positive feedback he receives on his work. The shows also expand his hobby from a solitary quest to a family affair. In addition to accepting canoe displays in her living room, den, patio and garage, Grace's wife Tanya and their 6-year-old son River enjoy traveling to shows with him. River is also becoming an expert on the family's menagerie of exotic pets and may likely follow in his father's footsteps to teaching.

And if snake charmer, restoration artist, researcher and family man weren't enough, Grace is also an accomplished photographer, capturing his many passions on film. He eloquently sums up the interconnectedness of his many talents by saying: "The nice thing about all my interests is that they work together. I love what I do here at Florida Tech, and I love the outdoors. These old canoes, they're made of natural materials, they get you out there to the best places. I always have a camera with me. And a lot of the time, I'm out there looking for snakes or turtles or butterflies. So it all works together pretty well."

Christena Callahan



Catch Dr. Michael Grace at his next show:

Georgetown Wooden Boat Show

Georgetown, S.C.

Saturday, Oct. 21

At last year's show, he won Most Historic with his circa 1873 15-foot Dan Herald Patent Double Cedar canoe.