

Storm-strewn boats become vulnerable to vandals, thieves

By **CHRIS DAVIS**

Staff Writer

With his house flooded and his dock destroyed, Dwight Davidson set out in search of his missing boat after Hurricane Fran.

He found it resting against a tree in Airlie Gardens, beaten but not destroyed.

It was something to be thankful for. But things got worse.

When he returned to his boat two days after Fran hit, Dr. Davidson discovered someone else had found it, too, and made themselves at home.

Someone broke off a lock, climbed inside and stole alcohol stored on the boat.

The vandals came twice, both times breaking locks, to use the boat as a hangout and to drink beer.

"I'm just disappointed in human nature," Dr. Davidson said. "I just can't believe they would take advantage of people when they're down."

After hurricanes, boat owners are typically plagued by vandals and thieves.

So far it has been a minor problem in New Hanover and Pender counties, where some estimate Fran washed away more than 2,000 boats.

Only a few cases of boat theft or looting have been reported.

One man told authorities his boat, washed into the middle of Military Cutoff, was stripped of its instruments.

State and local law enforcement officials are trying to protect boat owners until they can reclaim their property.

To prevent thefts, Wrightsville Beach and Carolina Beach are requiring a permit to salvage boats. Other New Hanover and Pender county beaches have asked for help patrolling the water but are not yet requiring permits.

People must prove they own a boat before getting a permit. And salvage companies must also prove they are legitimate businesses.

"The town is doing this to protect boat owners so anybody just can't come over here and say, 'This is my boat, I'm going to take it,'" said Michael Stokes, director of parks and recreation for Wrightsville Beach.

N.C. Marine Patrol officers are checking the waterways 24 hours a day between Topsail Beach and

Salvaging boats

Before moving a stranded boat, owners should call their insurance agency so an adjuster can inspect the damage.

To get your boat back yourself, permits can be bought at the Wrightsville Beach Town Hall.

Boats sunken or stuck on dry land may need to be professionally salvaged. Prices vary, but expect to pay up to \$150 per foot if you need a crane to salvage your sunken craft. Some salvage operations offer package deals if there are several sunken boats in one area.

Carolina Beach. The waterway is open to boaters.

More than a dozen officers are patrolling the waters, said Marine Patrol Officer Todd Midgett.

When they see people pulling up a boat, they try to contact the owner to make sure he's aware his boat is being salvaged, Mr. Midgett said.

Marine Patrol is also checking to make sure salvagers have permits issued by the beach towns.

"That's what we're trying to keep people from doing, going out and grabbing boats, salvaging them before the owners even know," Mr. Midgett said.

Meanwhile, boat owners are scrambling to get their boats out of the water.

The permitting process may help protect some boat owners, but it has also caused delays, hurting others.

Already, some boats that survived Fran have sunk because of delays.

Heavy rains have forced bilge pumps to operate long hours, wearing out batteries that haven't been recharged. Because boat owners haven't been able to reach their vessels, the bilge pumps stopped and many boats sank.

"The biggest problem I can see is we haven't been able to get on the island for a week," said Bob Beck, a salesman with Maritime Yacht Brokerage. "Now you probably have boats on the bottom that weren't sunk before."