The year 1995 marks the 40th anniversary of the lab’s founding. To commemorate this milestone, Mote News has chronicled a decade of the lab’s history in each issue. This is the last of four installments.

The Fourth Decade
1985-1995

Mote Marine Laboratory entered its fourth decade with the challenge of fulfilling a $5 million endowment fund-raising campaign to support the ever diverse research activities of the lab. The decade marked a new era of collaboration - collaboration among the scientists at Mote and with other research and educational institutions. And that vision for the lab’s future vitality and stability came from its Board of Trustees and the new leadership team. For on March 1, 1986, Dr. Kumar Mahadevan took the reins as Executive Director of the lab with Dr. Richard Pierce as Associate Director. The decade also saw Mr. Mote passing the gavel of the Board of Trustees Chairmanship to Bob Johnson in 1987. Dick Angelotti became Chairman in 1991 and Michael Martin took over in 1993.

In Kumar’s first official message as Director, he laid down a philosophy which has guided the lab to this day, “We must continue in the same spirit to strengthen our community service, maintain our independence in marine research and continue to prove that research excellence can be attained in a comparatively small laboratory such as ours.”

The late 1980’s was a time for new partnerships to meet the challenge of new research projects. In 1986, the West Coast Inland Navigation District provided funds for extensive regional manatee aerial surveys by Mote scientists, expanding a project which had been initiated with the assistance of Michael Saunders, president of Michael Saunders and Co. of Sarasota. The manatee program also received a boost from the auction of front row tickets from a Jimmy Buffet concert held at the Manatee Civic Center. AT&T hired Mote in 1986 to try to solve the mystery of shark bites in their undersea fiber optic cable off the Canary Islands. Experimental cable was laid in Mote’s shark tank with the eventual conclusion by AT&T that their cable had insufficient insulation to protect it in the wild. Dave Fletcher of Tampa lent financial support for the creation, in 1987, of the Southwest Florida Coastal Research Center at Mote to provide a much needed regional approach to solving environmental challenges. U.S. Senator Lawton Chiles and State Senate President Bob Crawford were present for the Center’s dedication.

Important strides were made toward large scale snook stock enhancement with state funding support secured by Senator Pat Neal and Senator Bob Johnson. Ground was broken in July 1986 on the hatchery at Port Manatee and the unusual partnership between the State of Florida and Mote was established to meet the stock enhancement challenge. There were other activities in fisheries research such as Karen Burns’ work in Mexico where she coordinated a king mackerel tagging program under contract with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Dr. Carl Luer continued his investigations to answer the mystery of why sharks rarely get sick, turning his focus on sharks’ immune systems. The United States Congress designated Mote as the home of the National Center for Shark Research. In May 1989, Dr. Robert Hueter conducted Mote’s first Gulf Coast Shark Census Tournament. This was the world’s only all catch and release shark fishing tournament and was an instant success. Shark research focused on the importance of Florida’s southwest Gulf coast as a nursery ground for sharks and the by-catch mortality of sharks from commercial and recreational fishing.

As Mote’s Marine Mammal Stranding team responded to more and more calls to handle dolphins and whales in distress, its scientific knowledge allowed a greater level of success in caring for these animals and returning them to the wild. Matt, a
bottlenose dolphin who had been entangled in crab trap lines in 1992 near Matlacha (Lee County, Florida), was the program’s first successful rescue, rehabilitation and release back to the wild. This was followed in 1993 with the rescue and release of another dolphin named Freeway. Mote’s sea turtle program grew during this same period. In 1991, staffed with more than one hundred volunteers, the program added its first full time biologist.

With greater and greater frequency, officials turned to Mote Marine Laboratory for assistance in meeting environmental challenges. It was not unusual to find Dr. Ernie Estevez on the Myakka River in the middle of the night, towing plankton nets to study fish eggs and larvae to provide baseline data on the river. Lee County Mosquito Control called on Mote’s expertise to test the effects of abate mosquito larvacide on marine life in aquatic preserves. In September 1986, the lab joined forces with Sarasota County Natural Resources Department in hosting a gathering of 60 government officials at Mote to develop a consensus to establish a management plan for Sarasota Bay. With the lab’s leadership, along with that of the City of Sarasota, these efforts resulted in an August 2, 1988, designation of Sarasota Bay into the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Estuary Program (NEP). Mote scientists played a major role in providing technical expertise to both the Sarasota and Tampa Bay NEP’s.

And it wasn’t just local and state government officials calling on Mote’s expertise. Dr. Kumar Mahadevan was called upon by Congressman Andy Ireland to provide expert testimony in opposition to offshore oil leasing plans for Florida. The lab hosted EPA officials and laboratories from the southeast for a three day conference in 1987 to promote a “Gulf Initiative.” Mote scientists continued to work with EPA and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) officials in this effort which grew into the Gulf of Mexico Program (GOMP). This effort is striving to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for managing and protecting Gulf resources. Lab scientists lent their expertise to scientific advisory panels for the Gulf of Mexico Program and conducted the national communication effort for the 1992 Year of the Gulf of Mexico. With all this national involvement, it was not unusual to see conferences held at the lab or visits by elected officials. In 1989 alone, the lab hosted tours by Congressmen Andy Ireland and Porter Goss, U.S. Senators Connie Mack and Bob Graham and State Senator Bob Johnson.

Mote’s fourth decade was a period of expansion of our facility. The shark tank was added to a remodeled aquarium and opened to the public in October 1988. A year later the aquarium hours were expanded to seven days a week. Florida Education Commissioner Betty Castor was on hand in 1991 to dedicate the lab’s new Martin-Selby Education Center. White House officials travelled to Mote in April 1994 to dedicate the first phase of the Ann and Alfred Goldstein Marine Mammal Research and Rehabilitation Center.

Mote’s facilities weren’t the only aspect of the lab to undergo expansion during this period. Exceeding its original goal, the endowment grew from zero to $5.2 million. Also, new and challenging ways were found to expand Mote’s education efforts. The ever-popular summer camps were enlarged to accommodate a wider range of students and activities. A critical milestone was reached when Mote teamed with the State of Florida, Sarasota and Manatee County School Boards, the Community Foundation of Sarasota, and the Selby Foundation to become a charter participant in the JASON Project in April 1989. During the next six years, thousands of Florida students travelled and explored the Mediterranean Sea, the Great Lakes, the Galapagos Islands, rainforests and volcanoes without ever leaving Mote. In 1992, the lab began its own interactive education series, Science VideoLink, to bring Mote scientists into the classroom via electronic communications. Adults who were interested in expanding their horizons, enjoyed the lab’s Monday Night at Mote lectures and the week-long Elderhostel Programs.

To meet the challenge of the future for marine science research, the lab outlined a vision to meet that need called Research 2000. Long range planning has always played a critical role in the lab’s success, and Research 2000 is a continuation of that planning process. While its important - and fun - to review Mote’s forty year history, we must turn to the future. In the next issue of Mote News, we’ll look into the crystal ball at what’s ahead for Mote Marine Laboratory.

Jim Culter shares knowledge of Sarasota Bay with EPA officials.