

A team of workers and student volunteers this summer began the second phase of the Mount Desert Rock research station reconstruction. The newly rebuilt boathouse will feature an observation deck for viewing marine mammals and a 60-foot boat ramp. PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN DENDANTO

(Printed from url=https://www.mdislander.com/maine-news/mount-desert-rock-facility-nears-completion)

Mount Desert Rock facility nears completion

October 4, 2016 by Taylor Bigler Mace on News, Waterfront

BAR HARBOR — After Hurricane Bill wrecked much of the College of Atlantic's research station on Mount Desert Rock in August 2009, researchers lost a crucial year of data gathering.

Each of the Edward McCormick Blair Marine Research Station's four structures suffered significant damage or were swept away altogether.

The boathouse was wiped out with no trace of the wreckage to be found. The generator shed was destroyed. Windows and doors in the main house were busted out; the front door was found in the kitchen. The 150-year-old granite tower of the lighthouse also suffered flood damage.

Mount Desert Rock was closed to researchers until the following August.

"It was heartbreaking," said Allied Whale Director Sean Todd. "The rock runs on love. It inspires you to work harder."

COA has hosted researchers on the rock since the 1970s and took ownership of it from the U.S. Coast Guard in 1998.

Allied Whale primarily uses the facility to observe marine mammals, including humpback and right whales, as well as seals.

Mount Desert Rock is 25 nautical miles from the COA campus, which allows researchers to collect data in what is essentially the whale's environment.

"This kind of experiment is an ideal thing," said Todd. "You're in an offshore environment without the trappings and risks of living on a boat."

Researchers and student interns stay on Mount Desert Rock from June to August. They take turns standing watch, observing marine mammals and maintaining the research facility.

It was love for the rock and its resources which drove faculty, students and volunteers to work steadily to rebuild what the storm destroyed.

Over the past few years, the facility was slowly patched up so that it could function.

"The deferred maintenance was really creeping up on us," said Todd.

It wasn't until 2014 when the project received a private grant that those involved could rebuild and improve what had been there before.

Project coordinator Dan DenDanto said the research station is improved following the devastation.

"We were able to rehabilitate and improve," said DenDanto. "Some of the facility improvements go beyond what the status quo was."

A team of seven, including DenDanto, two COA employees and independent contractors, work on the research facility.



College of the Atlantic staff, students and alumni pose near the boathouse on Mount Desert Rock, which is slowly being rebuilt. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL CORNISH

In 2015, the generator shed was repaired and turned into a sheltered classroom.

This season, workers toiled to rebuild the boathouse completely, which now features a new observation deck so that researchers can observe marine mammals discretely. Work on a new boat ramp also began.

The boathouse is the lifeblood of the rock, as it provides a link for bringing ashore people, materials and even drinking water.

“It is the umbilicus to the mainland,” said Todd.

Now, the improvement project is heading into its final phase and should be completed at the end of next summer.

The boathouse will need some more work, and then DenDanto’s team will turn its focus to the main house.

“We’re getting to the end of our viable building season, and so we’ll need to complete the bottom 60 feet of the boat ramp,” DenDanto said.

The house can sleep 20 students and researchers, but some of the structure is not wired for electricity.

Next season, the team will install solar panels and improve the building’s wiring.

Todd said the improvements will allow COA to host third-party researchers and summer programs.

“The station will always be first and foremost for COA students,” said Todd.

DenDanto, a 1991 COA graduate, said the research station is integral to research and also is beneficial to students as a learning and life experience.

“I’ve been involved with the program over the years, so I have a direct understanding of the benefit of that program,” DenDanto said. “I’ve seen firsthand how it makes a difference on [the students’] academic benefit.”