

## CONSERVATION

## DUMP &amp; HOPE

*Artificial reefs don't always benefit fish* Ted Williams

In the mid-1960s Lady Bird Johnson helped direct one of the most successful and popular TV ads ever made, in which Cree brave Iron Eyes Cody paddles his birch-bark canoe through a trashed riverscape, remains stoic for 20 seconds, then weeps. ("Indian men don't cry," Cody had told the First Lady. "I won't do it." But she insisted, so he stared into the sun until his eyes watered.) It was part of Lady Bird's crusade to beautify America by ridding it of old tires, auto bodies, refrigerators and the like. Someone proclaimed that fish would benefit if the rubbish were dumped into the ocean. More than a few biologists had serious reservations, but they couldn't hold against the political pressure. Thus was born America's artificial reef program.

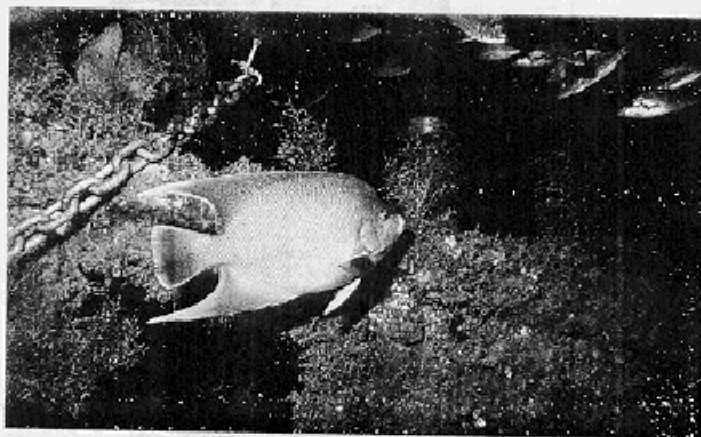
It was almost like spontaneous gener-

ation. Dump some junk and, presto, large adult fish. They showed up in days, even hours. Anglers loved it. The press loved it. Politicians loved it. Industry made hay with it. When Chevron was ordered to convert its rusting filling-station gasoline tanks to plastic it wangled a permit to discard the metal ones at sea. They didn't attract any fish to speak of, which could explain why the ad—entitled "The Little House at the Bottom of the Sea" and featuring large groupers and other fish hovering around the marine dump—is a painting rather than a photo. "Two-and-a-half miles offshore, a hundred feet down, is an unusual housing development," reads the caption. "In an area once virtually empty of life, families of Florida fish now live in coral-covered cylinders that were once gas station storage tanks . . .

Do people really do all that so fish can have a population explosion? People do. Chevron."

Reef construction swiftly took on a carnival-like atmosphere. Toilers, boxcars, pink concrete dinosaurs and an airplane (which was promptly vandalized by divers and destroyed by an anchor) were merrily tossed into the sea. Derelict ships were sunk with lavish pyrotechnics that attracted crowds of boaters and sometimes killed fish. One sinking was dramatized with the dropping of dummy bombs by military jets. In 1985, when Florida's Broward County sank the freighter *Merceda*, Palm Beach County declared that if Broward was going to have a Mercedes, it was going to have a Rolls. So, with enormous fanfare, Palm Beach County dumped a working 1967 Rolls Royce Silver Shadow. A company called Core International offered \$1,000 to anyone who, when buying one of its computers, turned in a disk drive made by competitor IBM. "We're gonna deep-six thousands of 'em," shouted a Core ad.

"Buy a drive, get a reef." Core president Hal Prewitt and his staff wore themselves out throwing the drives over the



FLORIDA DEPT. OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, DIVISION OF MARINE RESOURCES

*Dump it and they will come.  
But man-made reefs that  
attract fish often just make  
them more vulnerable.*

