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Fake reef home to real fish

Artificial habitat mitigates damage from port expansion

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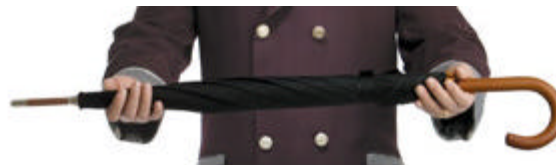
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WHITTIER - Less than 24 hours after artificial reefs were lowered into Smitty's Cove, Alaska sealife started checking out the new real estate.



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► New homes: Calvin Riddle, right, Brown position a group of reef balls lowered into the water at Smitty's C Whittier on Wednesday to create ar reef. The reef was in response to d when Alaska Marine Lines expande container facility at Whittier last ye

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"There were two sunstars ... already glommed onto the structure, just che them out I'm sure. And there were a couple of copper rockfish swimming ; them," said Brian Lance, a federal fisheries biologist.

The reef was installed this week to provide a haven for small plants and fis Whittier, where barges stacked high with containers bring everything from graders to toilet paper into one of Alaska's busiest ports.

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CALENDAR February

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The federal government required Alaska Marine Lines to mitigate damage shipping company caused to marine habitat when it filled in tidal waters at its container facility expansion last year.

The expansion, which disturbed a little less than an acre, forced baby fish deeper water where they are more vulnerable to being eaten.

The roughly \$100,000 reef project is an effort by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Alaska Marine Lines, the Prince William Sound Center, among other entities.

It involves two types of structures _ one built with about 100 concrete pyramids weighing 400 pounds each and the other with about 100 concrete balls weighing 300 and 400 pounds each, said Lance, of NOAA's habitat division.

The reef balls are hollow so small fish can use them to hide from larger fish. They have holes that create mini-whirlpools to help mix the water column, and are wide on the bottom and thin at the top so they won't tip in stormy seas. A rough surface encourages algae growth.

The pyramid fish havens work on the same premise.



Al Grillo / The Associated Press

► Heavy habitat: Concrete balls weighing 300 and 400 pounds each, front and concrete pyramids weighing 300 and 400 pounds sit on a barge at Smitty's Cove in Whittier on Wednesday, waiting to be lowered into the water.

A crane with an 80-foot arm was used to lift the reef balls and fish havens off a barge and submerge them in the cove.

The two reef styles were installed side-by-side so researchers can compare how well each works in coastal Alaska waters. Both the reef balls and the pyramids have been used successfully in more southern waters, but it is unclear how well they will work off Alaska's coast.

Lance is optimistic. "Fish and invertebrates start using it pretty quick," he said.

Reef balls have been used successfully all over the world, including cold Canadian waters.

Todd Barber, chairman of the Reef Ball Foundation, an Athens, Ga.-based group.

Barber said the structures typically fill in two weeks with fish that normally don't fight. Once their territorial disputes are settled, the fish leave, with the victors returning later.

"After a full season of growth, whoever won the fight before takes it over and goes home," Barber said.

Smitty's Cove is a treasure, said local diver Jerry Vandergriff, who pushed the project and has completed more than 1,200 dives there.

Vandergriff's favorites are the smaller creatures - the bay pipefish that is so small it can slip through a straw, the stubby squid that turns purple when approached.

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the spiny lump sucker, a fish that is ugly in name only.

"It looked like a little clown. It was bright orange and round - just as cute could be," he said.

Schroeder, the wildlife biologist, on reef installation day carried around a rare heart crab - which has hairy legs and a heart-shape - in a water-filled container. "I've only seen one other before," he said.

He was eager to introduce the crab to its new digs.

"She will have a new home when we release her today," he said.

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