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THE ENVIRONMENT

Teens become reef builders

The benefits of an artificial reef South Plantation High students helped create will go on long after they graduate.

BY JULIE LEVIN
Special to The Miami Herald

Jasmine Jeffers is proud to know a science project she helped float will be around for generations to come.

The Plantation junior was one of about 20 South Plantation High School students who recently participated in creating a series of artificial reefs off South Florida's shores.

"It's a really wonderful feeling to know you've helped revive the ecosystem," Jasmine said. "After I'm gone, it will still be here for my grandchildren."

The reef creation is the result of a nearly yearlong project. The students helped install 30 artificial reefs, known as reef balls, in the waters off Oleta River State Park in North Miami and about a mile off Golden Beach.

The balls, made of concrete and weighing from 300 to 2,000 pounds, will serve as a home for sea life.

"They are designed to help let things grow on them," said Veronica LaFranchise of Plantation, one of three students who led the project.

It began as a project for the Girl Scouts. Veronica and Jasmine, with fellow scout Rebecca Schultz, then decided to expand it into a school science project. All are part of the Everglades Restoration Magnet Program at South Plantation High School.

"It brings together so many people and is something that shows we all can do something to protect our reefs and encourage regrowth, so that future generations can benefit," said advisor Allan Phipps, who teaches Advanced Placement Environmental Science.

The project took months of preparation. The girls had to get permits from a number of agencies, create the reef balls and study the best way to create different habitats.

They got help from a company called Reef Innovations in Sarasota, which donated the molds to create the reef balls.

On March 25, with help from park employees, they floated the smaller reef balls into 15 feet of water off the

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park. A research vessel from Florida Atlantic University helped sink the others 40 feet down off Golden Beach. Veronica and Rebecca, both scuba divers, dove down to help anchor them.

"I want to be a marine biologist, so it was great," said Veronica.

Rebecca's mother, Elena Schultz, their Girl Scout leader, said the project will provide ongoing learning experiences.

"They'll be measuring the growth on it, and finding out what plants grow and what fish take to it," said Schultz, a parent advisor.

The reef balls are reportedly the only ones off Oleta River State Park and will take years of careful monitoring, long after the students have graduated. The long-term benefits are what impress Rebecca the most.

"These types of projects are for other students to take over and help monitor," she said.

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