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Bridge pilings dumped to start artificial reef off Flagler coast

By **MICHAEL REED**
Staff Writer

Last update: 12 May 2004

Concrete pilings weighing almost 1,400 tons rested precariously on the edge of a powerless barge Wednesday as volunteers with Flagler County's artificial reef program waited for them to fall overboard.

Six-foot waves hit the barge broadside as it swayed in the ocean 18 miles southeast of Matanzas Inlet. An excavator on tracks -- heavy construction equipment -- compounded the motion as it knocked the concrete off the sides with its bucket. The pilings were once part of a bridge, but they became Flagler County's seventh artificial reef when they splashed into the water and sank to the seabed 65 feet below.

The reef will create a marine habitat, which makes for good fishing and diving, said Lauren Kornel, an environmental planner for the county. Artificial reefs are made of concrete debris, sunken vessels and other material sent to the bottom of the ocean.

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The site was chosen because it's near a shipwreck, said Jim Netherton, a scientific adviser for the program. Algae will start to grow on the concrete within five days, but it will be much longer before the reef is prime for fishing, he said.

"If you want the greatest variety of fish, it really needs to age for a year," said Netherton, who works at the University of Florida's Whitney Lab, a marine organism and biological research facility in Marineland.

At Flagler County's six other reefs, fishermen catch grouper, snapper, tuna and kingfish, said Paul Treue, a fisherman and volunteer.

"The reef will hold just about anything," Treue said.

The project was funded by a \$60,000 state and federal grant, and the Flagler County Tourist Development Council and County Commission spent another \$10,000, Kornel said. About 50 volunteers help with the artificial reef program, and the new reef took 2 1/2 years to accomplish, she said.

The site was identified and mapped, and the county garnered reef material. On Wednesday, a tugboat and crew from Mobro Marine Inc. of Green Cove Springs slowly worked the barge between two buoys that marked the site. The crew cast anchors, untied the barge from the tug and readied the excavator to push the concrete overboard.

But the project didn't run as smoothly as it could have.

Pilings slipped into the ocean in rough seas, and the anchors didn't hold. The barge drifted a mile northwest while the excavator scattered a trail of concrete off target before officials realized what was happening.

Netherton said the mishap didn't set them back. They originally planned to dump two piles of material, but the new reef would become one big pile instead, he said.

The bridge material was shipped from Jacksonville and Bunnell to a staging area in Green Cove Springs, and Mandarin High School pitched in 55 reef balls -- porous concrete made specifically for artificial reefs.

In time, officials say the site will add to Flagler County's offshore recreation.

The Atlantic seabed is flat like a desert, save for a few rock outcroppings, from the shoreline to the continental shelf about 50 miles out, Netherton said. Fish will stop at the reefs to rest and feed as they migrate, he said.

Flagler County began its artificial reef program in the early 1990s with the encouragement of Commissioner George Hanns, and the county has two permitted sites for reefs.

The new reef -- named George Hanns Reef -- will create a triangle with Big George's Reef that was built in 1995 and the sunken sailboat. The five other reefs at the second site are almost 22 miles southeast of Matanzas Inlet.

Volusia County has an artificial reef program with more than 40 reefs at 13 permitted sites. Last year, the Volusia County Council approved plans to acquire and sink a freighter called Antilles Star. County officials said within the next month the ship will be towed to a reef site and sunk about 18 miles northeast of Ponce de Leon Inlet.

Netherton said an eighth reef is planned for Flagler County near the Matanzas Inlet. The program is waiting for funds from Tallahassee, he said.

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Did You Know?

Artificial reefs are one solution to the disappearance of natural coral reefs. Scientists continue to discover ways the natural reefs are destroyed. Here are a few coral killers.

- Abandoned fish nets get tangled up with corals, causing damage as well as preventing other species from using the reef. Boat anchors dropped onto reefs also cause damage.
- Runoff from land, including sewage, can smother corals. In waters off Thailand, nutrients in some runoff has led to the growth of starfish, which devour corals.
- Sometimes corals lose all their color due to bleaching, which can be caused by disease, excess shade, change in water temperature or other stresses. Scientists still don't entirely understand bleaching, but they do believe the coral polyps expel the nutrient-recycling algae that live in their tissues and produce the bright and vibrant colors corals

are noted for. If the stress continues to effect the coral, it will eventually die.

SOURCE: National Wildlife Federation, www.marinebiology.org, www.uvi.edu/coral.reefer/bleach.htm

-- Compiled by news researcher Megan Gallup.

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