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Reef balls to help fledgling fish populations

September 1993, Waterfront News Palm Beach, Page 13

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WEST PALM BEACH – Four "reef balls" were deployed in Lake Worth Creek last month as part of a new artificial reef experiment. The goal is to enable fish to develop their own indigenous populations around the artificial reefs, said Bob Deacy, assistant team coordinator with the Reef Research Dive Team. The big fish can move around, but the juveniles need these kind of artificial reef structures to develop, he said. "If they don't have these nursery grounds, then a larger percentage of them will die or never make it to adults."

Jerry and Todd Barber from Atlanta, Georgia invented the inflatable concrete structures. The reef balls were designed to be inexpensively built and deployed by local dive clubs and other organizations. Each ball-shaped reef costs about \$75 to build. The modules are designed around a four-foot diameter nylon ball. The ball is surrounded by a steel mesh which is placed inside a fiberglass reinforced concrete mold. Because the balls float, they are easily towed out to the designated drop site and deflated as they are deposited in the water. The Palm Beach Volunteer Reef Research Dive Team aided the Barber's in the construction and deployment of the reef balls, which were deposited to 20 feet of water on the east side of the Intracoastal Waterway, just south of the Palm Beach Inlet.

"We've never experimented with these types of modules down here -our goal is to observe these over time to determine if they do provide habitat for fish and other marine creatures," Deacy said. Members of the dive team will be monitoring the artificial reef quarterly by doing fish counts and a species analysis to determine what is growing in a one-foot area around the balls.

The Reef Balls were placed near an existing pyramidal module reef experiment being conducted by the University of Miami. The location will allow for comparisons to be made between the two designs at various stages of growth attachment.

The Reef Ball Development Group was created by Todd Barber to assist in the restoration of the world's tropical reefs by establishing artificial reefs. The group will help obtain permits for the artificial reefs and assist other groups in deploying and monitoring the-structures.

Barber says the Reef Ball Development Group is currently designing a 24-rack reef ball structure that will hopefully be tested in an offshore site in Destin, Florida.