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> More Than 60 Reefs in Five Years and Still Going
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> by Tim Croft
> It is an entirely volunteer organization, comprised of weekend anglers who
> devote considerable time and resources to a simple mission.
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> And last week the Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association deployed reef
No.
> 65 since its inception a little more than five years ago.
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> That's the equivalent of more than 12 reefs per year.
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> Not too shabby for an organization without a full-time employee, without a
> full-time fundraiser, that depends on the goodwill and generosity of
others
> to stay afloat.
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> "(The 65 reefs) are tremendous," said Charlene Neel, the MBARA treasurer.
> "It's totally volunteer and it's usually only about four or five people at
a
> time doing this. We really have done a lot."
>
> Which is something of a fish tale in reverse.
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> The latest reef consists of some 100 reef balls, the concrete
configurations
> that resemble huge mounds of Swiss cheese or a Wiffle ball sliced through
> the middle.
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> Each weighing 2,000-3,000 pounds, the balls cost \$300 each.
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> All 100 went into one reef in the Car Body permit area. The location's
> coordinates are 29N 53.628, 85W 32.634. Using Loran, the location is
14109.5
> and 46843.5.
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> The reef balls were piled one on top of another, producing a large reef
some
> 8-9 feet high on the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.
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> MBARA folks have found piling the reef balls together rather than
spreading
> them out over a larger area is a more effective method of attracting the
> bigger fish, such as grouper.
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> "We've found if they are spread out the holes (in the reef balls) aren't
> large enough for the bigger fish to swim through," Neel said. "Piling them
> on gives the large fish more structure" in which to inhabit and thrive.
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> The fish, Neel added, will start appearing "pretty quickly" at the new
reef,
> within two to three months.
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> The latest reef was funded in part with a \$15,000 grant from the Fish
> America Foundation, through a joint venture with the National Oceanic and

> Atmospheric Administration.
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> Noting that more than 1 million full-time jobs and \$108 billion of the
> American economy depends on sportsfishing, the Fish America Foundation
seeks
> to provide funding for "local hands-on projects to enhance fish
populations,
> water quality and applied fishing research in North America," according to
> the organization's Website.
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> Based on Alexandria, Va., the non-profit founded in 1983 has funded more
> than \$5 million in projects throughout the country.
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> The grant from Fish America required a local match of \$15,000, which the
> MBARA culled from its bank account, which is sustained through local
> fund-raising efforts.
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> It is the way the organization must often do business, constantly trolling
> for partners such as Fish America or the Northwest Florida Improvement
> Foundation, which provided a \$10,000 grant toward the MBARA's last reef
> deployment of steel cylinders from Smurfit-Stone in Panama City.
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> The 100 reef balls and the barge used in last week's deployment came from
> Coastal Reef Builders Inc., out of Pensacola, another valued partner for
the
> MBARA.
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> While the past successes are clear as the crystalline waters of the bay,
the
> future, hinging on fund-raising, is always somewhat murkier for the MBARA.
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> The group is working on receiving state and federal approval for a new
> permit area farther out into the gulf, sifting through the red tape and
> leaping through the many government hoops to secure those permits.
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> And this, keep in mind, is entirely done through volunteer effort.
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> Meanwhile, an opportunity to obtain scrap materials from the Port St. Joe
> paper mill has apparently gone by the wayside because of MBARA's lack of
> funds.
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> "We just don't have the funds," Neel said. "To continue to do this we need
> donations and support for the organization."
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> That such a plea has to be made at all seems downright shocking given the
> tangible dividends of the organization's work.
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> According to a 1998 study by two Florida State University professors and a
> NOAA economist, the annual economic impact for reef systems in Bay County
is
> more than \$11 million.
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> In the five-county area from Pensacola to Mexico Beach, the economic
impact
> during the 20-year life span of a typical reef was estimated at \$656
> million, compared to an overall investment of but \$5 million.
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> Using various economic models that examine travel expenses and other costs
> expended during the 1,684 million days fishermen spend each year at reefs
in

> the five-county area, the impact in dollars during the 20-year life span
> of
> a reef is anywhere from \$801 million to \$1.68 billion.
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> Therefore, for every dollar spent on reef systems, the return ranges from
> \$131 to \$234.