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FLORIDA METRO

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

REEF/ Tourism council considers artificial reef for ecotourists

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West Citrus, especially the springs around Crystal River, is widely known as a good place for scuba divers and snorkelers to watch manatees in winter. Tourism officials came up with the reef idea to help summertime business.

The county turned to Sarasota's Reef Ball Development Group for ideas.

The company, founded by Todd Barber, has worked on 250 projects worldwide. Barber and tourism types proposed a 100-by-100-yard reef, five to seven miles into the Gulf of Mexico, between Homosassa and Crystal River. It would sit in 7 feet of water at low tide and rise 2½ to 3½ feet off the bottom.

Barber says his reefs have varying designs. This one probably will use a series of 25 to 30 concrete slabs, 8-by-8-feet, with four large balls and a series of smaller ones partially embedded in the slabs.

"Each slab will weigh 5 or 6 tons," he adds.

They probably would be built and moved to the site by Reef Innovations, an Orlando contractor for the group, Barber says.

The balls are made of hollow, no concrete. Their size, number of holes and weight vary depending on the project. The holes give the marine life their entries and exits. Bigger balls with bigger

holes also let snorkelers inside. A rough exterior lets things like coral grab on.

The county expects to spend \$20,000 or so on the project.

Barber says he got the idea after returning to the Cayman Islands.

"I went there when I was 15 and into underwater photography. When I went back years later a hurricane had wiped out the coral reefs. I wanted to find something that wouldn't be affected by [storm surge]."

In some cases, reef balls are anchored. In Citrus County's case they won't be because of the sandy bottom and underlying limestone. Instead their weight will keep them in place in the strongest surge, Barber says.

The county needs a Department of Environmental Protection permit before it can lock in the reef's details. That could be issued as soon as a map showing the new location is submitted, says Bob Stetler, a DEP administrator.

"Their first choice wasn't suitable," he adds. "It was real shallow with a lot of seagrass and high-quality coral formations the reef balls would have been in conflict with."

With luck, Lyons says, the reef balls could be in place by October.

For more information about reef balls, visit Barber's Web site: <http://www.reefball.org>

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Reef relief

Citrus County officials consider building an artificial reef to attract marine life and boost tourism.

By JIM TUNSTALL
 of The Tampa Tribune

HOMOSSASSA — They look like giant mushroom caps with holes.

But to fish, coral and other sea critters, they're an entire city.

Concrete "reef balls" have been used to build artificial habitats as near to us as Sarasota and as far away as Malaysia. If an ecotourism group has its way, they soon will create a marine metropolis off west Citrus County.

This one, however, would be a tad different from typical reefs.

It's meant for snorkelers who are hunting memories and nothing more.

What lives there, stays there. Line and spearfishermen won't be welcome.

"The idea is to look, then leave," says Sam Lyons, ecotourism committee chairman for the county's tourist development council.

"We can't duplicate places like Key Largo," home of John Pennekamp State Park. "But we can develop something closer to home on a smaller scale. Water clarity [in the Gulf, near shore] is very good under most conditions. And



VAUGHN HUGHES/Tribune

the reef should attract grouper, snapper, porgy, rock bass and a gelfish, as well as scallops, stone crabs, starfish and brain coral."

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