

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

FLORIDA JOURNAL

Attention Shoppers
challenges Rous
Coral Gables m

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 1998 F2

Partners Seek to Turn the Gulf
Into a Set of Private Fishing Holes

By CHAD TRIMBUR

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
PENSACOLA — Looking out over a field of 50 concrete balls, Dale Minnick sees the foundation for an ambitious underwater engine.

The so-called Reef Balls — four feet tall, weighing two tons, filled with holes and resembling gigantic chunks of Swiss cheese — cover the edge of a dirt lot at the shipyard here. But if Mr. Minnick has his way, they'll be spread out on the Gulf of Mexico's flat, sandy bottom.

Once there, these spheres will become artificial reefs, growing a thick fuzz of coral and becoming home to dozens of hungry grouper, red snapper and other prized bottom fish.

The mechanics of the plan aren't unusual. For decades, weekend fishermen and charter-boat captains have dumped rusted car frames, washing machines and wooden shrimp boats on the sea floor to attract fish and improve their catch. In the late 1980s, federal and state officials took over artificial-reef building, banning individuals from dumping on their own to prevent hazardous materials from going out to sea.

But when the government took over construction of artificial reefs, their purpose changed from private fishing holes to public ones: The location of the reefs was made available through a widely perused official atlas of sites.

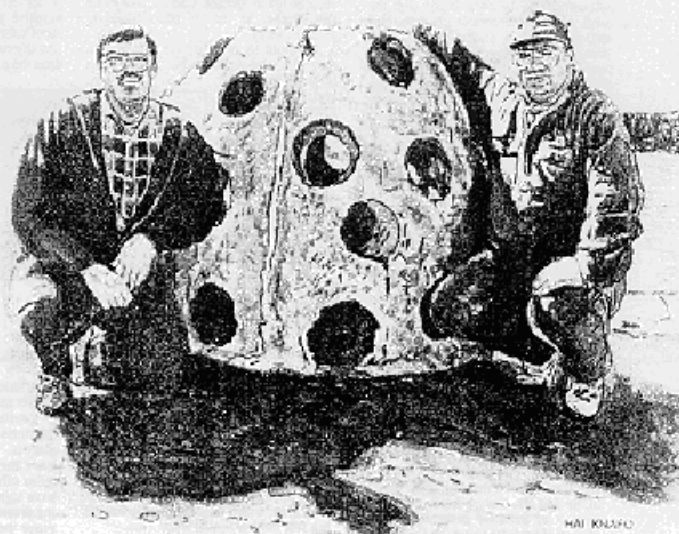
Now Mr. Minnick and his business partner, Bill Carson, want to take a step back — and take real-estate development in Florida to new depths. Their business, Coastal Reef Builders, is asking state and federal officials for exclusive rights to a 114-square-mile area off Pensacola in the Gulf of Mexico. If they get the rights, they'll sink hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of Reef Balls there, and sell anglers the coordinates for a one-time cost of \$300 a ball. If it works in Florida, the two men may seek permission to do the same off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina.

"We build and deploy it and give you the numbers to your own little fishing hole," says Mr. Minnick.

Sounds Fishy?

But the idea of selling private plots for fishing, like a hunting club on land, is creating waves in Florida's \$3 billion sports-fishing industry. It has never been done before on such a large scale, regulators say, and that has a lot of people worried.

For many fishermen and marine scien-

Sunken Treasure

Dale Minnick, left, and Bill Carson are asking Florida and U.S. officials for rights to a 114-square-mile area in the Gulf of Mexico, where they would sink hundreds of their Reef Balls for sale as private fishing holes.

tists, it's unthinkable that artificial reefs — for years, shared by all anglers and divers — would become private fishing holes for a select few. They say it isn't right for a public resource to be auctioned off for private gain.

"I think it would set a bad precedent for a private group to put a lock on such a large area of natural bottom that belongs to everyone in the state," says Mike Eller, captain of a charter boat, the Fish N Fool, in neighboring Destin. "It is a monopoly on public resources."

But others say that private reefs may be better for the fish as well as fishermen. Open access, they say, has resulted in most of Florida's 1,270 known reef sites being overfished and the further depletion of a shrinking fish population.

"This represents new ground for the state and its policy regarding artificial reefs," says Bill Lindberg, associate professor in the University of Florida's Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences. "This may offer a more responsible

alternative to the way we have been doing business by at least offering some constraint on the tragedy of the commons."

In his research, Mr. Lindberg has found that artificial reefs can boost fish production by about 8% if left undisturbed, but within a year those gains can be wiped out by intense fishing. Once several sites were publicized to anglers, he documented a 42% reduction in the fish stock and elimination of all adult grouper within eight months.

Thus, Mr. Minnick says the element of secrecy is critical to not only selling Reef Balls to fishermen but also making sure they have enough fish to catch.

"To make these sites immediately public would totally destroy our whole concept," Mr. Minnick says. "There are too many sports fishermen out there. We aren't doing it for slaughter."

Protecting the 'Money Hole'

Coastal Reef Builders isn't planning to fill its entire 114-mile area with Reef Balls. The main reason they asked for such a

Please Turn to Page F5, Column 1