

FLORIDA JOURNAL

Partners Try to Turn Gulf Into Fishing Holes

Continued from Page P1

longer is simply to reduce the charges so anglers would be less likely to pay a heavy rate. "Visibility in the water can be a concern in certain areas," says Mr. Minnick, who has been working on ways to get rid of the price increases. "But, all that, Mr. Minnick figures his customers would expect to keep their redfish catches up to par two years before he sells them. That's fine with me," he says, "because they'll just stay more."

These grand plans have modest origins. Mr. Minnick, 41, and Mr. Carson, 37, started their business in a dark garage where they worked on their cars. Three TV sets and a VCR were their only equipment. They began by running their first Beef Ball traps with plastic bags marked "live" in the Gulf. They overcame American apprehensions at the start, thanks to a local fisherman who was of help, but Mr. Minnick says he thought the city of Pensacola would be a good place to start.

They still haven't raised to cover the cost of equipment or \$25,000 for a tugboat, since last fall they have could their permit allowed until quite chance that "Visions" would ever be seen. Mr. Minnick, a fisherman with a greenhand's license, took his son with him and a body shop worker.

Thanks to the Pensacola fishing industry, they say, they have. Mr. Minnick, presiding over a company that has now moved many of his fish making a living off the water, says his first job out of high school was at a local shrimp boat and for 10 years he had nothing but a K-Mart shelf-washer. By age 25, he was running a boat shop at a Pensacola marina and taking reservations for several charter boat captains. It was then he met a friend in depth with Mr. Carson, who ran the docks and helped out more.

Mr. Minnick studied the local Red permit for nearly a decade before becoming an authority on reclamation in late 1996 for the nonprofit, St. Lucie-based organization, Reef Ball Receptacle Group, which designs Beef Balls in the mid-Atlantic. Starting later, Mr. Carson was recruited separately, but didn't work for government funds, instead helping design the artificial reef.

But they grew increasingly interested in the bulk of their work in their own local waters, much of the western Panhandle. The coast isn't permitted to reefs from Pensacola to 25 miles offshore—out to sea. For the average recreational fisherman, a 20-mile limit, the loss of a hundred square miles of coral reefs, and the date one escapable reality expressed in interest in taking on the additional responsibility for reparation of environmental damage, is sobering.

Enter the partners, and their dozen-plus pals of the sea. Mr. Minnick's

has soon the crowds public reefs attract. On weekends in the summer, sunbathers under a covered Wal-Mart parking lot or under a dozen or fishing boats gather for position in line for sunlight. The pressure on those reefs could be beyond what's sustainable, the option of moving a reef even an artificial rock, Mr. Minnick concedes, it could also offer an alternative to fossil fuel burning, which will become inevitable, he says, if government officials.

Mr. Minnick also argues that artificial reefs can serve as an economic boon to local charter boat owners and others in the tourism trade. The base of artificial reefs is the reason only about a dozen charter boats run out of Pensacola, compared with more than 100 based in neighboring large beach towns, the Alabama, the low, and another 50 charter boats based in nearby Destin.

To draw up permits for the project, they also plan to build North America's largest artificial reef—a mile long, measuring 1,300' by 100'—and will be widely advertised to the public. They hope to raise \$50,000 in corporate sponsorships to pay for its construction.

But first, as many they'll get approval from the government for both the public and private sites. Currently, the partners' proposal is being studied by state environmental officials, who are debating what, if anything, coastal beef builders should propose to do with this permit and others. The state environmental and other sources doesn't support the reuse of reefs, but some state officials have suggested that rules could apply to Coastal Reef Builders' 11-mile area, which could require a strict budget of \$2 million annually.

"Maybe Ted Turner could afford that, but not us," says Clark Bass, an environmental consultant working for Coastal Reef Builders. "That is a deal breaker."

A more reasonable approach, says Mr. Minnick, would be charging only for the 25 square miles within their 30-mile zone, no figures that would total \$2.08 a mile—a far more manageable sum. He can also propose getting one Reef Ball, it's a practice for every 10 or 15 feet separated.

Mr. Minnick is willing to work out a compromise, even though he doesn't think he should have to pay anything less than the price can't be denied access to large reefs or the water they begin. However, only the buyer will be given the coordinates, location, and timing of dropping a Reefs-in-a-

Bucket upon a Reef Ball by sediment or getting down the location after seeing someone else do the spot.

And their permit application doesn't prevent other groups from seeking government approval to dump materials other than Reef Balls in the same area. "We aren't blocking anyone from doing anything," Mr. Minnick says.

Nevertheless, the state still thinks it deserves a cut from this money-making venture. "Even if we're a private activity done for profit for private use," says Bob Krueger, an environmental manager for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection office in Pensacola. "It's not commercial, but definitely gives access to the public."

Mr. Krueger acknowledges that this regulatory proposal doesn't fit under a strict interpretation of agency rules for setting the costs of the lease. Instead, he predicts the plan's fate could rest with the gov-

ernment care if they had a permit for "private Gulf," says Chip Blackwell, a local boat captain in Mexico Beach near Panama City. He has been using his boat, Miss Mary, over the past year to haul Reef Balls for several companies with contract values of thousands, depending on supplies.

"They passed up my offer, there is no money down there," he says. "There are definitely lots of people who are willing to rough my money for a private fishing place."

If the regulatory hurdles can be cleared in Florida, Mr. Minnick says, he's considering staking out territory in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Georgia or South Carolina, where he has already surveyed the public Reef Balls. "We'll try not others," he says. "We'll go where there's interest."

Indeed, he says, there's a strong interest among Alabama anglers to move Coastal Reef Builders north rather than Pensacola, since Alabama officials have banned the dumping of cars and house appliances in recent years. Artificial reef deployment off the Alabama coast has dropped by as much as 80% in the past five years due to the state's restrictions on materials, officials there report.

Meanwhile, there are others in Florida who may try to do the artificial business. Joe Mark Hollis, a former seafarmer owner in Seagrove, has a ready agent \$15,000 for a 30-ft. Navy cargo and is now back in Seagrove. He has 100 acres of a 100-square-mile artificial reef area off the coast of Taylor and Dixie counties that could create revenue for the commercial fisheries putout of business by the 1994 ban on large fishing nets.

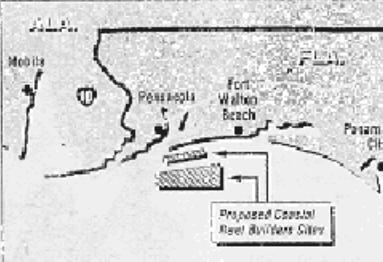
Fish Tales

For now, the Reef Ball partners are content to wait. Both Mr. Minnick and Mr. Carson are expected to make their decision in the coming weeks. If desired, the two partners now to learn from it and try again. If anything, they say, the Reef Ball business has taught them patience.

Mr. Minnick first attempted placing a Reef Ball into a trough's mouth on a flat in a forearm beamline, when its normal weight and no way to do the has to call a trawler to pull it out.

And then there was the time they were attempting to cross the bar in the long boat and large on their way to a Reef Ball in Tarpon Springs. There is very cold when they started their journey, 22-mile journey, but halfway across the Gulf a violent storm brought the boat in, whipping up 12-foot waves crashing against the boat. The large boat when passing waves loose from its cables and the rope was drawn Mr. Minnick into a cabin window. They turned back and pulled the boat to shore.

"You can't be in a hurry when you're in the sea," Mr. Minnick says. "I just think we are five years ahead of schedule."



gulf and state officials, who are the final arbiters on issues concerning state lands.

Coastal Reef Builders has also faced questions from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which must approve the plans before they extend into federal waters. 100 miles offshore. Agency officials say they have signed off on nearly every aspect of the project except how much liability coverage the company must carry in case the Reef Balls do any damage during a major storm or Hurricane. A major storm surge can push artificial reefs into shipping channels, shrimp nets or even on shore, though intention consider Reef Balls for use exclusively as offshore materials.

Bring In Tourists

The plan does have allies. Several Pensacola city leaders share Mr. Minnick's hopes of improving the area's lure for tourism. "No big opinion, it would generate the recreational opportunities out there," says Jack Nobles, a Pensacola City Council member and president of a local community board. "It would bring in tourists."

And some who make their living on the water say the more reefs the better. "I