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Artificial reefs need not be big to make impact

By TERRY TOMALIN

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Many anglers are familiar with the massive artificial reefs off our coast, some spreading for hundreds of yards across the ocean floor.

But any experienced fisherman will tell you that any object, be it a sunken skiff or discarded shrimp net, will attract fish.

That's why some people think small, inexpensive and easy-to-transport artificial reefs may be the wave of the future.

Friday, officials from the Florida Sea Grant Marine Extension Program and Manatee County's Environmental Management Department showed environmentalists and representatives of fishing clubs just how easy these mini-reefs are to make.

The Reef Ball Development Group -- a volunteer organization that says its mission is to help the oceans through the development of "aesthetically pleasing, ecologically sound and economically designed artificial reefs" -- has already placed more than 40,000 artificial reef balls in more than 250 projects worldwide.

These specially designed, hollow, concrete balls have numerous holes that provide excellent habitat for various fish. The Manatee County artificial reef program is looking for volunteers to help build reef balls for existing and new reef sites in Tampa Bay.

"We are looking at placing some of these reef balls at already permitted sites in the Gulf of Mexico, lower Tampa Bay and near the mouth of the Manatee River," said John Stevely of Florida Sea Grant.

Concrete is ideal for artificial reefs because its uneven surface encourages the growth of algae, barnacles and soft corals, which attract fish. The holes, cut throughout the

reef ball, give small fish shelter from predators.

Reef balls come in various sizes -- from 6 inches to 6 feet -- and weigh from 6 to 6,000 pounds. They are made by pouring concrete into a fiberglass mold containing an inflatable central bladder surrounded by various-size inflatable balls to make holes.

The bladder can be left in the reef ball so the unit can be towed behind any size boat. At the artificial reef site, the bladder is deflated and removed.

Natural reefs come in various sizes and shapes. Artificial reefs function better if they mimic nature. So the makers of reef balls produce six sizes, and the units can be placed in the water (with the help of divers) so the holes connect, imitating a large, natural reef system.

For more information, contact the Reef Ball Development Group, Box 3349, Sarasota, FL 34230-3349, or call
(941) 752-0169 . John Stevely can be reached at
(941) 722-4524 .Did You Know

* * *

Recreational fishing activity creates 100,000 jobs in Florida. The seafood industry creates 40,000 jobs. Fishing annually contributes \$4- to \$5-billion to the Florida economy, more than any other state.

Eighty-five to 95 percent of sport and commercially harvested shellfish and finfish species in Florida depend on estuaries (where freshwater meets saltwater) such as Tampa Bay.

Sixteen of Florida's 21 metropolitan areas are built around an estuary or lie at the mouth of a river where it flows into the sea.

Boat registrations in Florida have approximately doubled in 15 years, a rate three times greater than the population increase. Florida's 735,000 boats represent one for every 18 residents or one for every eight Florida families.

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