

[<=Back](#)

SARASOTA BAY

4-H Club does its part for marine life

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By *Patty Allen-Jones*
Staff Writer

No longer is 4-H Club just about arts and crafts projects or raising farm animals and plants.

On Friday, several members of Sarasota's Ridin Rednecks 4-H Club helped Reef Ball Development Group of Sarasota sink 350- to 400-pound concrete balls in Sarasota Bay to become reef habitat for marine life such as starfish, hermit crabs, oysters and a variety of fish.

Reef Ball is a nonprofit organization that has deployed 50,000 reef balls in waters throughout the world and 2,000 so far in Sarasota Bay.

"I think it will be really neat if we get to go scuba diving . . . if we can come out here often and see the progress, making note and taking pictures," said 11-year-old Miriam Fortune. "It will be a good show for the Sarasota County Fair."

Said 11-year-old Danielle Tabar, "I think that it's really interesting, because we can help speed up the process of making a reef and helping repair them."

Fourteen balls, about 3 feet in diameter, were taken by personal watercraft from Sarasota's 10th Street boat ramp and dropped in the water about 100 yards behind the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall and the old Selby Library building.

That area is barren of marine life because of past dredging projects, said Gregg Cohn, who has done other deployment projects with the Reef Ball Development Group.

Ten of the Ridin Rednecks' 35 members volunteered last summer to study marine life, either because they had fish tanks at home or enjoyed being around water, said Marlene Strickland, the group's leader. Until now, their only marine activity had involved using a seine to look for sea life off Lido Beach.

The 4-H'ers placed identification tags on the reef balls, which they also helped make on July 2.

Concrete that had been treated to match the acid level in the saltwater was poured in fiberglass molds, which contained inflatable balls to make holes in the concrete balls.

Once the balls were completed, buoys inside each ball were inflated. On Friday, after each ball was put in place on the water's surface, the buoy was deflated, sending the ball to the bottom. A diver then went down to take the deflated buoy off.

The reef balls will last 500 years, said Todd Barber, president of the Reef Ball Development Group. Some of the marine life that will live there will help purify the water, allowing more light to the bottom and ultimately restoring the sea grass.

Six of the 4-H'ers, including Miriam, rode on the backs of personal watercraft that towed the balls from the boat ramp to the deployment site. Others observed from boats.

This project "really provides the kids with a lot of opportunities," Barber said. "It gives them a good feeling of a real and positive impact on the environment."

Miriam agreed, even though towing the ball was tough because it started sinking before it got into place.

"It's really been a fun experience," she said. "It was really neat, especially when the kids got to ride on the Jet Ski. We got a new adventure."

Staff writer *Patty Allen-Jones* can be contacted at 957-5167 or patty.allen-jones@herald-trib.com.

[<=Back](#)