



Feb. 4, 2000

[<Back](#)

Reef Balls to form Lake Okeechobee reefs

By Bill Sargent

A FLORIDA TODAY column

LAKE OKEECHOBEE, Fla. - In a first for a freshwater environment, Reef Balls will be placed on the bottom of Lake Okeechobee this summer to form a series of artificial fishing reefs.

Project officials said 100 of the hollow concrete balls riddled with holes so fish can swim inside, will be dropped at five 1/2-acre sites around the lake starting in June. Each ball will weigh about 1,800 pounds and measure 4 feet in diameter and 3 feet high.

Reef Balls, specifically designed and manufactured as fish attractors, have been used in over 400 reef projects world wide, most of them in deep-water ocean areas.

Sportfishermen will benefit from the Okeechobee project because fishing is sure to improve around the reef sites.

Biologists from Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will coordinate the fish habitat project which is being made possible, in part, through a \$35,000 donation and partnership between the Wal-Mart FLW Tour and the FishAmerica Foundation. The tour is a professional bass fishing series, and the foundation is the conservation arm of the American Sportfishing Association.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will be responsible for deploying the Reef Balls. The Corps also is matching funds raised by the commission for the project.

A \$35,000 check was presented to commission officials last Saturday in Clewiston during the Wal-Mart FLW Tour bass tournament.

Tom Marshall, managing director of FishAmerica, said Lake Okeechobee

was picked for the project because it supports a high quality largemouth bass fishery.

"The FLW Tour and FishAmerica want to do our part to ensure that all anglers have an opportunity to enjoy the great fishing on this lake for years to come," Marshall said.

A second stage of the project will include the planting of four types of native aquatic vegetation along a 5-acre site between Indian Prairie Canal and Pearce Canal on the west shore of Okeechobee.

Don Fox, a fisheries biologist with the commission, said torpedo grass and cattail now dominate the 5 acres where bulrush once was widespread. Bulrush provides spawning areas for bass, bluegill and shellcracker.

Bulrush, eelgrass, peppergrass and knotgrass will be reintroduced to the site by late summer, Fox said.

"Sustained high water levels have definitely had an effect on the lake's ecology," Fox said. "Increased water levels have permitted high energy waves to build and move across the lake, uprooting submerged and emergent plant communities in the process."

When coupled with declines of other plant species, significant amounts of vegetation have been lost, Fox said.

Lake Okeechobee's recreational and commercial fisheries are valued at more than \$100 million. According to the commission, recreational fishing alone contributes \$26 million annually to local economies, and bass tournaments on the lake represent another \$4.2 million in annual expenditures.

Some of the top names in bass tournaments and saltwater fishing will be spotlighted at a free four-day Spring Fishing Classic at Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World in Dania Beach on Feb. 10-13.

Free seminars with famed anglers like Davy Hite, Stu Apte, Paul Elias, Shaw Grigsby, Penny Berryman and Mark Sosin will run hourly from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day.

Hite is the 1999 BASS Masters Classic winner, and on Jan. 15 Grigsby won the \$100,000 first prize in the Big Kmart Bassmaster Top 150 tournament on the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes.

Famed Marine Wildlife Artist Guy Harvey will make a special appearance on Feb. 12 from noon until 4 p.m.

Many of the country's top fishing tackle manufacturers will have displays

and representatives present.

For more information, call (954) 929-7710 , or visit the Web site at <http://www.basspro.com/>

Rob Hendry of Satellite Beach could see several big trout laying in the shallow water of the Indian River north of Sebastian Inlet, but they refused every artificial he threw.

"Maybe live bait will work," Hendry thought, and he sped off to Whitey's Bait and Tackle to buy a dozen finger mullet.

But Fred Lee, owner of the shop, had only three small finger mullet left in his bait tank. So Hendry took them.

"It wasn't long before he was back with a 7 1/4-pounder and a 4-pounder," said Lee. "The finger mullet did the trick."

Like Hendry, Dan Winnett of Orlando was wading the Indian River flats south of the inlet when he took an 8-pound trout on a live shrimp.

Lee said some snook have been taken at the inlet since the season opened on Tuesday. Brian Fry, visiting from Chicago, weighed an 11 1/2-pounder he caught from the north jetty at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday on the end of the incoming tide. He used a live pinfish.

During the winter and spring months, commercial fishermen using cast nets take certain non-game fish in Central Florida lakes and canals.

John Benton, a fisheries biologist with commission, said the use of the circular nets are legal, as long as the fishermen are taking shiners for bait, or catfish, or blue tilapia, also known as Nile perch.

"Nile perch arrived in the state from an accidental release in the 1960s, and have made themselves at home here," Benton said. "Unfortunately, these fish compete for the same habitat as the native fish species, such as bass and bream."

The cast net fishermen sell the tilapia and catfish to fish markets, and the shiners to bait houses for bass bait.

"When you see fishermen removing these fish, they are likely doing it legally," Benton said. "However, if you have any concerns, please write down a description of the boat and its occupants, the boat registration number, and the time and day and location, and call the commission."

The commission's Ocala office is (352) 732-1225 , or after hours (800) 342-9620 .

Bill Sargent is the outdoors editor for Florida Today. He can be reached at (321) 242-3697 .

[<Back](#)

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