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No Photo 'Reef balls' providing homes for marine life

Officials pleased with results of effort thus far

By PAMELA WOOD, Staff Writer

Few people ever get to see what goes on below the surface of the bay, where oysters grow, crabs scuttle and fish dart around.

On a gray, foggy morning last week, a crew from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation hoisted an innovative part of the bay's underwater life to the surface to show it off - a holey, concrete "reef ball" covered in oysters.

Dark and a bit scary-looking from far away, the reef ball hauled up from the bottom of Eastern Bay is actually prime habitat for all sorts of underwater critters.

Environmental officials were pleased with the looks of the reef ball, one of dozens that were planted at the bottom of the bay last fall.

Though they made sure the reef balls were looking good before inviting a boatload of journalists to the site, officials weren't so sure what they'd find when they first monitored the site earlier this year.

"The really exciting thing is we didn't entirely know what we were going to find," said Stephanie Reynolds, a fisheries scientist for the foundation.

When scientists checked the balls earlier this year - by sending divers down and hauling reef balls up - they were pleased to find them covered with healthy oysters, mussels and other critters.

"We saw virtually no dead oysters on any of these," Ms. Reynolds said.

Reef balls have been a popular restoration project in the Chesapeake



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Bay. The bay bottom is covered with hundreds of them. Fishermen like them because they attract oysters, and in turn, fish.

While there have been plenty of projects to create and deploy reef balls, the monitoring of the sites is just now starting to catch up.

For Thursday's demonstration, the CBF's Patricia Campbell, with its large yellow crane, anchored at the Hollicutt's Noose site in Eastern Bay. A high-tech National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration boat, Bay Commitment, motored nearby.

NOAA employee Rich Takacs dove down 15 feet to find one of the reef balls. He attached a yellow inflatable "lift bag" to float the reef ball closer to the surface.

Patricia Campbell Capt. Karl Willey and volunteer Dan Johannes used the ship's crane to bring the reef ball up onto the deck. There it sat next to a new reef ball that hadn't been deployed, for comparison.

Mr. Takacs said it isn't exactly easy monitoring the reef balls. But it's vital to see how well they're working.

"Part of the challenge is the monitoring is almost as complex as the restoration," he said.

Some of the reef balls in Eastern Bay got something of a head start when it comes to the oysters.

After volunteers poured concrete to create 69 reef balls, 27 of them were placed in giant tanks filled with bay water at the CBF's oyster center at Discovery Village in Shady Side. Then scores of tiny, free-swimming oyster larvae were dumped in the tanks.

"They matured to the point they needed to stick to something," Ms. Reynolds said.

In this case, "something" was the reef balls.

With the baby oysters attached, the reef balls were then placed on the bottom of Eastern Bay.

Last week's demonstration of the year-old reef balls shows that the science is working, officials said.

Ms. Reynolds said most of the oysters were 2 or 3 inches - well outpacing the normal oyster growth rate of 1 inch per year.

The bay foundation and NOAA will continue to monitor the Eastern Bay reef balls, as well as others in the Chesapeake Bay.

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