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News & Information

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Buying a ton for the Bay
 By Renee Gilliard, Daily Banner

CAMBRIDGE - The Maryland Department of Natural Resources made plans to purchase chunks of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge in order to improve the Chesapeake Bay.

On the Potomac River, a 7 1/2 mile stretch including the 6,075 ft. bridge is being reconstructed at a cost of \$2.5 billion.

The ambitious six-year renovation extends into next year when both of the two replacement bridge structures will be complete. From the demolition, the previous bridge has yielded tons of concrete chunks of which the Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association and Maryland DNR have discovered has a beneficial aquatic purpose.

The MSSA, along with the DNR and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, began a local artificial reef installation plan when they placed eighty concrete reef balls into the Choptank River near Hambrooks Bar.

With concrete donated by Barnett Concrete and molds from Composite Yacht, the MSSA produced 120-pound blocks of concrete perforated with 4 to 8 inch holes, known as reef balls.

Mid-Shore Electronics also donated storage space for the completed reef balls. These concrete reefs provide hard, porous surfaces on which organisms such as oysters or truncates attach themselves. Fish are therefore attracted to the reef to feed and for their own shelter, providing a rich fishing area.

When Dorchester County MSSA president Clint Waters heard about the bridge demolition, he was excited by the opportunity to further improve the local fishing industry.

"I thought this was really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, because these artificial reefs create a habitat for a lot of marine life. That bridge is producing tons of reef material," Mr. Waters said.

MSSA plans to contribute to the Maryland Artificial Reef Initiative, a collaboration of more than thirty partners, which focuses on using the surplus concrete from the demolished bridge to create at least a dozen reefs throughout the Bay. Plans to develop reef sites are already under way, including local fishing spots around James Island and a 1944 WWII seaplane wreck in the lower Choptank.



Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association members Phil Todd, left, Bob Geisler and president Clint Waters show the concrete reef balls their organization has used to create marine habitats around the Choptank River and in the Chesapeake Bay. Daily Banner/Renee Gilliard

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The first reef site to benefit from the old bridge was an existing reef at Point No Point in St. Mary's County last summer. Nearly 4,000 tons of concrete was added to the existing artificial reef.

Benthic (water-bottom) communities consisting of mussels, algae, barnacles and oysters have already begun to grow on concrete chunks and local fishermen have reported considerable catches just weeks after the placement. This type of operation, however, can be costly. Transportation of the material from the demolition site to the Point No Point reef site cost the DNR \$38,000.

More concrete is available for the other planned Bay sites, but funding remains a problem.

Though the MARI promises improvement in the sport fishing industry and benthic ecology, and bridge contractors are willing to share costs with the DNR, the DNR estimates the success of this project will still cost \$800,000 for material transport. To solve the financial support problem, the MARI has opened funding to donors. Anyone who supports the initiative can finance the transportation of one ton of the old Woodrow Wilson Bridge to an artificial reef site for a \$25 donation.

The MSSA will hold a public interest meeting Feb. 15 at the Cambridge American Legion at 7:30 p.m., when representatives from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation will present information on the MARI.

Interested donors may send checks payable to CCD MD Reef Fund, MSSA Office, 8461 C Fort Smallwood Road, Pasadena, MD 21122, or log on to www.ccamd.org.

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