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Reef-balls plan needs review, permits to continue

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Special to *The Gazette*

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A group of local divers hopes an artificial reef will draw a montage of elegant marine life into the May River.

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But a state official who works with South Carolina's artificial reef project says the proposal has yet to be reviewed and might not pass muster with state regulators.

opinions

Two weeks ago, the Hilton Head Island Scuba Dive club began a donation drive to purchase 50 "reef balls" - porous concrete bladders that can grow coral and provide shelter for marine species.

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Amber Hester, recently elected president of the 32-member club, said the group hopes to buy 50 of the 3-foot-by-4-foot balls.

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They cost \$204 each, said Joe Pelletier, owner of Island Scuba Dive & Travel, a partner in the proposed reef project.

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Up to 20 reef balls could be used in the river, Hester said. The remainder would be dropped in offshore artificial reef sites already being developed by the state.

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The idea for the project, Hester said, came from conversations she had with family members and fellow divers on how to beautify and diversify the depths of the May River.



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The river is a popular destination for fossil and artifact hunters who seek treasures hidden in its bed, she said. But it is a murky underwater world with little marine life.

Hester said a vibrant coral reef ecosystem can be developed in the river. The reef would provide a haven for marine creatures that otherwise would be swept out to sea by the tides.

Mel Bell, section manager of the state Department of Natural Resources' fin fish management program, said he was unaware of the dive club's plans.

To gain permission to place an artificial reef in the May River, he said, the club would need go-aheads from his department, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the state Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management.

Bell said that while the Department of Natural Resources was interested in developing some river reef projects, similar projects in the state have failed.

"Why do something that Mother Nature isn't doing already?" he asked.

Building an artificial reef in a river is different from building one offshore, he said, because the ecosystems already present are so different.

Most successful river reef projects are based more on tidal reefs that emerge at low tide, he said. Such projects are based on oyster reef ecosystems.

Bell said that while he has never worked with the dive club before, the Hilton Head Island Sportfishing Club has been involved in offshore and inshore artificial reef projects in the past.

Concerns about boater safety in the May River would be addressed in the permitting process for the reef balls, Bell said.



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