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Alaska Gets Its First Artificial Reef

By MARY PEMBERTON , 05.12.2006, 08:42 PM

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Fifty feet down in the cold waters of Smitty's Cove, a concrete paradise is being built for some of Alaska's most unusual creatures.

Alaska's first artificial reef was recently installed near Whittier - one of Alaska's busiest ports - to provide a haven for small plants and fish, near where barges stacked high with containers bring everything from road graders to toilet paper into the state.

The reef was in response to damage done when Alaska Marine Lines expanded its container facility at Whittier last year.

The federal government required the company to mitigate damage done to marine habitat when it filled in tidal waters to extend a ramp last year. The project disturbed a little less than an acre near the mitigation site. It entailed

building a wall and laying down a flat metal sheet, forcing baby fish into deeper water where they are more vulnerable to being eaten.

"They covered all the good stuff," said Mark Schroeder, a wildlife biologist with the federal Minerals Management Service, who helped promote the project.

The demonstration project involves two types of reef structures - one

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built with about 100 concrete pyramids weighing 400 pounds each and the other with about 100 concrete balls weighing 300 and 400 pounds each, said Brian Lance, a fisheries biologist with the habitat division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and who orchestrated the project.

The reef balls were purchased from a contractor who works with the Reef Ball Foundation in Athens, Ga., a nonprofit group that has helped provide half a million reef balls for 3,600 projects in 56 countries.

The reef balls are hollow so that small fish can use them to hide from larger fish. They come with holes that create mini-whirlpools to help mix the water column. And they are thick on the bottom and thin at the top so they won't flip over in stormy seas. A rough exterior encourages algae growth.

The pyramids are the Fish Haven design built by Artificial Reefs Inc. of Pensacola, Fla. While they look different, they work on the same premise. They are stable, hollow and come with holes to promote marine growth and a place for fish and other animals to hide.

"They have holes in them so water moves through to oxygenate the interior, create eddies and turbulence," Lance said.

The two reef styles were installed side-by-side so researchers can compare how well each works in coastal Alaska waters.

Less than 24 hours after Wednesday's installation was completed, marine animals were already checking it out, Lance said.

"There were two sunstars ... already glommed onto the structure, just checking them out I'm sure. And there were a couple of copper rockfish swimming among them," he said Friday. "There already is marine life at least investigating what is going on there."

Jack Rasmussen, port captain for Bering Marine Corp., helped with the reef installation. A crane with an 80-foot arm was used to lift the reef balls and fish havens off a barge and submerge them in the cove.

Both the balls and the pyramids have been used successfully in more southern waters, but it is uncertain how well they will work off Alaska coasts.

Lance is optimistic.

"Fish and invertebrates will start using it pretty quick," he said.

Todd Barber, chairman of the Reef Ball Foundation, said reef balls have been used successfully all over the world, including cold Canadian waters.

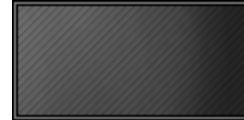
"They typically will be filled with fish in two weeks," he said.

Barber said the fish normally show up to fight over the new structures. Once their territorial disputes are settled, the fish leave with the winners returning later.

"After a full season of growth, whoever won the fight before takes it over as its new home," Barber said.

Smitty's Cove is a gem for divers, said Schroeder, who on installation

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day carried around a rarely-seen heart crab - which has very hairy legs and a heart-shape - in a water-filled container.

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"I've only seen one other before," Schroeder said.

He was eager to introduce the crab to its new digs.

"She will have a new home when we release her today," he said.

Local diver Jerry Vandergriff, who also pushed for the project, said Smitty's Cove is a treasure. He's completed more than 1,200 dives in the cove.

Vandergriff has had sea lions come right up and look him in the face.

"They are very playful. They come up and get hold of our fins and shake them. They get hold of our snorkel and try to get our masks off," he said.

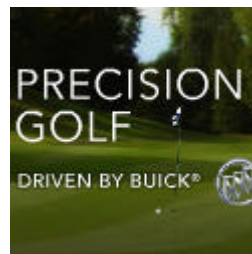
Vandergriff's favorites are the smaller creatures - the bay pipefish that is so small it can slip through a straw, the stubby squid that turns purple when approached and the spiny lumpsucker, a fish that is ugly in name only.

"It looked like a little clown. It was bright orange and round - just as cute as it could be," he said.

Vandergriff grins when thinking about the cove's many comb jellies.

"They pulse with beads of light when you shine your flashlight on them. They sparkle like the Las Vegas strip," he said.

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