



Alaska gets its first artificial reef

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WHITTIER, Alaska (13 May 2006) – 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. It took less than 24 hours before some of them started checking out the new real estate _ the state's first artificial reef.

"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," said Brian Lance, a federal fisheries biologist.

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

The federal government required Alaska Marine Lines to mitigate damage the shipping company caused to marine habitat when it filled in tidal waters as part of its container facility expansion last year.

The expansion, which disturbed a little less than an acre, forced baby fish into deeper water where they are more vulnerable to being eaten.

The roughly \$100,000 reef project is an effort by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Alaska Marine Lines, the Prince William Sound Science Center, among other entities.

It involves two types of structures _ one 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 Lance, of NOAA's habitat division.

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

The pyramid fish havens work on the same premise.

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.

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



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

Reef balls have been used successfully all over the world, including cold Canadian waters, said Todd Barber, chairman of the Reef Ball Foundation, an Athens, Ga.-based nonprofit group.

Barber said the structures typically fill in two weeks with fish that normally show up to fight. 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 treasure, said local diver Jerry Vandergriff, who pushed for the project and has completed more than 1,200 dives there.

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.

Schroeder, the wildlife biologist, on reef installation day carried around a rarely-seen heart crab _ which has hairy legs and a heart-shape _ in a water-filled container. "I've only seen one other before," he 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.

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