

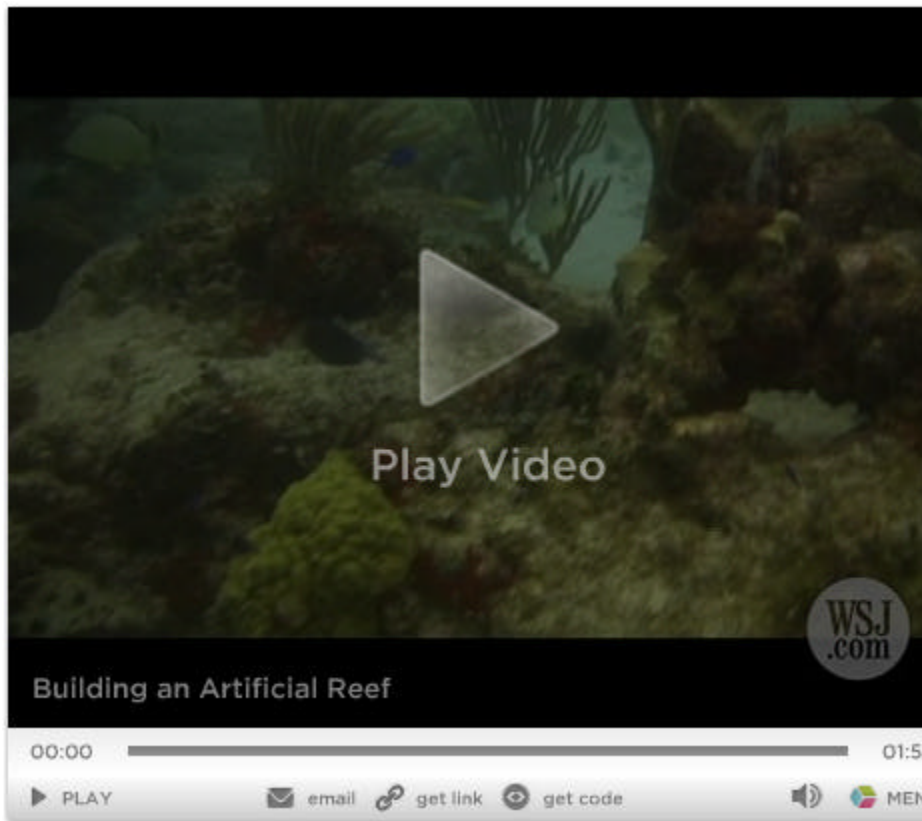
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Friday, November 09, 2007

Having a Ball: Non-profit organization builds undersea habitats



The [Wall Street Journal](#) printed an article on October 26 entitled, "From Balls of Concrete to Habitats for Sea Life: 'Designer Reefs' Proliferate As a Tool to Counter the Toll of Pollutants, Overfishing."

Our staff was moved by the story and wanted to learn more.

We got in touch with the chairman of the Reef Ball Foundation,

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Todd R. Barber, just before he left for Cancun to work on another project. The following is a transcript of our conversation, covering everything from reef balls to reef tanks. All photos are used with the permission of reefball.org.

Marine Depot: For readers who may not be familiar with your foundation, what exactly is a reef ball and what is the purpose of your organization?



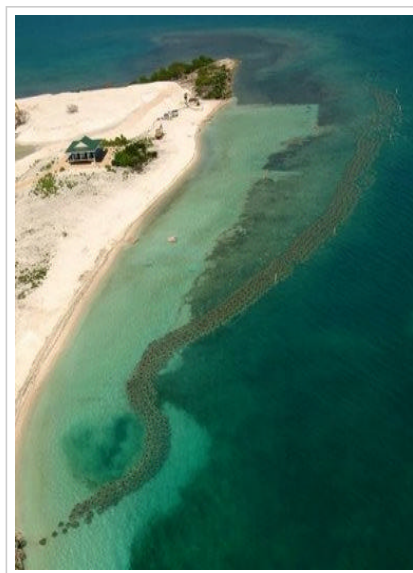
Todd R. Barber, Chairman, Reef Ball

Foundation: The Reef Ball Foundation is a 501(c) 3 publicly supported non-profit and international environmental NGO. Our mission is to rehabilitate our world's ocean reef ecosystems

and to protect our natural reef systems using Reef Ball artificial reef technologies. Reef Balls are artificial reef modules placed in the ocean to form reef habitat.

MD: What were your your inspirations for taking action? Were you always eco-friendly, or were there events that triggered a greater environmental awareness?

TRB: It is definitely an awareness that has built up over a lifetime. It started with learning to Scuba Dive when I was 14 years old in the Cayman Islands in 1976. Repeated family vacations there got me into the underwater photography hobby and I used to take pictures every trip of this tiny little coral head of the beach of the Cayman Kai resort...I knew every creature that visited it or lived on it. When I started college in 1981, my mother started a dive shop and by then I was deeply into the marine aquarium hobby to satisfy my hunger for being underwater and to keep a glimpse of that tiny coral



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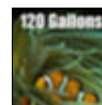
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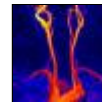
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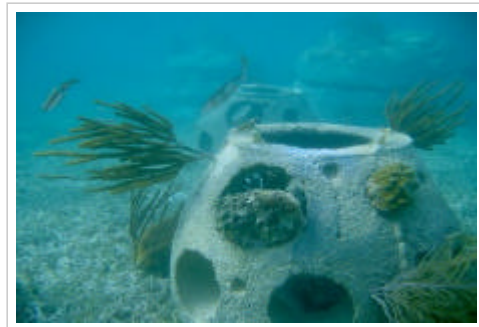


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reef in the Caymans in my mind. Soon, I came to understand much of the interaction of all the marine life. My father built amusement rides and was an inventor so I always had a tinkering side to my personality and an intense desire to understand things.

During my college years, frequent road trips for diving in the Florida Keys also meant collection of critters for my (by then multiple) aquariums. I started getting a sense of guilt that the fish and corals I brought back would eventually end up dead. So, I started tinkering with my tanks to make them keep the marine life alive longer...with my goal being as long as they lived in the sea. Well, in 1982 we did not exactly have the reef tanks of today. Albert Thiel had written a book on the subject and Martin Moe was working out breeding of clownfish but we didn't really know all the requirements for keeping live corals and true reef tanks. I stumbled—somewhat accidentally—on a combination in my tanks that worked including a 5-foot-tall protein skimmer run off of an oxygen concentrator a friend had left over from a medical supply business and 500 watt metal halide lamps meant for outdoor amusement park lighting (which by the way, required me to use a dorm refrigerator plumbed with hundreds of feet of plastic tubing to keep from over heating the tank).



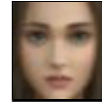
Well, to make a long story short, I was getting obsessed with the health of the reef and was learning a great deal about what can go wrong on a reef (and how fast that can happen). Fast forward to 1988 and I was taking a rental sailboat from Ft. Lauderdale to Bimini, Bahamas with my family for spring break. I think

it was one too many beers at a Ft. Lauderdale lake the crossing despite bad seas. Turned out Hurricane Gilbert (a Cat. 5 storm) was churning up the Caribbean and throwing waves my way. 18 hours later—having had a near death experience—I knew I wanted to do something with my life to make a lasting difference.

On my next trip to the Caymans something horrific happened: Gilbert, which almost took my life, also took away my little tiny reef head in the Caymans I photographed every year. By now it was 1991 and for the most part there was nothing to build reefs out of except tires and ships and to me that was not a reef. There would have been no way to get anything big in there anyway because it was only 6 feet deep and behind the reef line so even getting there by boat was almost impossible.

So, over a cocktail my father and I had the crazy idea to coat a beach ball with concrete covered in rocks and reef-like stuff and rolling it into the water, floating it to the reef site, and then popping

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the beach ball to sink it creating a new reef for "my friends" that lost their home. In 1993, a chance meeting with the head of Florida's artificial reef program on an airplane gave me the opportunity to test this idea in the sea and slowly the concept of Reef Balls became formed. In 1994, I quit my full time job as a management consultant and invested every penny I had into my dream and now we are the world's leading artificial reef producer with over 3,245 documented projects in 59 countries! *[as of this interview]*

MD: What was the marine aquarium hobby like in the early 80s? How did you acquire the equipment and livestock at the time? Do you have a tank today?



TRB: Back in 1981, it was a very exciting time for hobbyists...we were just figuring out all the trace elements, ORP levels, nutrition, lighting, and calcium levels required to have true reef tanks supporting live rock and corals. There was not much written on reef systems, so any hobbyist could basically be a full expert on the subject with a few months of reading. We didn't realize back then that the hobby was not always sustainable in our collection efforts so fish and "standard" aquarium stock were cheap. Corals were rare, they were pretty much special order or you had to collect them yourself but since CITES and other import restrictions were not in place (or enforced) it was not unusual to bring back a fish or two from every exotic tropical vacation. If you wanted to build a reef aquarium, you pretty much had to scour industrial catalogs for yourself and build equipment yourself. Although we made some pretty impressive stuff back then...you could identify most of us by the stained carpets and salt creep from catastrophic tank leaks or failures. Even though fish were cheap...the hobby was not. We had to spend thousands to locate suitable equipment and adapt it for our purposes.



A few of us were more enlightened as were lucky enough to be divers too and to understand the systems. These lead to major advances such as refusia tanks, red mangrove filtration, and

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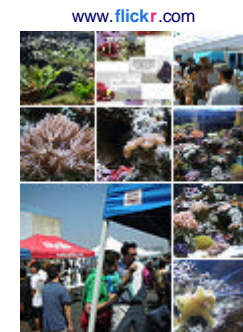
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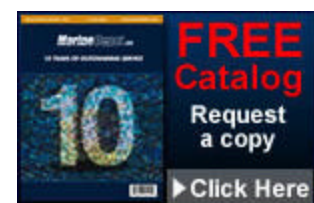
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photosynthesis. And fortunately, the world started getting enlightened environmentally too starting around the early 90s. We started supporting tank raised fish and propagated corals. We are still not there yet....I have proposed one simple law that I think will eventually solve the crisis with livestock sustainability. I propose that once 3 independent businesses can supply any marine animal to the trade from captive breeding (or if you wanted to be more liberal larval raised) that we should ban the collection or import of that species. Quite simply, market forces would then balance the trade to sustainability....even in the wild caught species as there would be more reward for commercial folks to "crack the code" on valuable stocks.

I have recently moved from my waterfront house in Sarasota, Florida to Greenville NC and took down my last tanks for the move donating the corals I grew to the Tampa Pier aquarium. I am currently not in the hobby and will wait to take it up again when I move back to Florida in a few years (And I just have to admit to being too lazy to mix saltwater anymore after having an ocean intake system set up in Florida!). But of course with my job I still get to see more marine life than I could ever host in a tank.

MD: So what's next for Reef Ball?

TRB: We are focusing on a number of new initiatives. Our Mangrove Solutions division (<http://www.mangrovesolutions.com/>) is doing very well...we just published a paper on fertilizer release rates using plaster/concrete disks and slow release fertilizer that is reef safe which is exciting. We are also developing new technology for creating oyster reefs and I believe we will spin that technology off as a new division too. We have seen exponential growth in our erosion control division that is using Reef Balls to create reefs where they will help protect beaches and other properties from eroding. For me, the most excitement is in our Coral Team Division. We are publishing a 200+ page manual, A step by step guide to Reef Rehabilitation for Grassroots Organizations with a formal unveiling at the International Coral Reef Symposium in Ft. Lauderdale next summer and we have a draft version of that manual online now at our website (<http://www.reefball.org/> under Reef Building, Step By Step Guide).

We are excited to be able to share our years and years of Reef Rehabilitation techniques with the whole world. There is so much going on; it is a full time job just to



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keep up with every project's news. To that end, we completely redid our website and added an interactive "live update" section where people involved in Reef Ball projects could update our website as things happen. We hope that will make it easier for folks to connect to a project to lend a hand.

As we believe in transparency for a non-profit, we post every single picture we take or get involving Reef Balls on our on-line photo database. It's organized by location so where ever you are interested in you can see what is going on in the reef ball world. It also includes news articles, scientific reports, blogs, videos and just about anything we can scrounge up electronically.

MD: What can we do to help?

TRB: Get involved...everyone can help. Don't buy plastic bags when you are visiting places near the water. Volunteer for a project. Donate a buck or two. Buy fish for your tanks that are tank raised...buy propagated corals. Change all the light bulbs in your house from incandescent to florescent...yep all of them and you will save a buck too. Drive a hybrid car or take a bike or walk or at least don't drive a gas hog. Write a blog about your favorite charity. Sign up under causes in Facebook to say you support the Reef Ball Foundation. Join the Reef Ball MySpace group. Visit the Reef Ball Foundation educational center in Second Life. Start your own reef building project. Learn to scuba dive. Tell a friend about us. Use a mooring buoy instead of dropping your anchor. Go to the Reef Ball website, find a project you like, find out who did it, call them and say thank you. Whenever you see a Reef Ball, take a picture and send it to us. Put a link to <http://www.reefball.org/> on any website you control. Vote green. Strive to make your life more paperless. Encourage people to make constant small changes for the better, but don't expect wholesale change. Have your ashes placed in a Reef Ball...don't take up valuable land when you die. When people view your aquarium, use the opportunities to explain the importance of our natural coral reefs...remember 98% of the planet will never see a real reef....you are an ambassador!

Posted by jeffry r. johnston @ [3:03 PM](#)

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