Reef balls to restore 'ocean's rainforest'
Transplant to help coral reef growth

By Natalie. P. McNeal
KNIGHT RIDDER TRIBUNE

A damaged coral reef in Dania Beach is getting a transplant.

Last week, researchers and oceanographers from Nova Southeastern University and Broward County took the first step in repairing a coral reef that was damaged seven years ago by a Naval nuclear submarine.

On a barge about a q uarter mile away from^ the coastline, a large crane dropped 160 artificial reefs, also known as "reef balls," into the ocean.

The reef balls, 3-by-4-feet balls that look like meteors, help stimulate coral reef growth. Reef balls are, made of a special concrete and are designed to mimic natural reef systems.
"We're trying to speed up or enhance recruitment of coral," said professor Richard Spieler, who is administering a study on coral growth.

Settlement provides funding

Three years ago, the state of Florida sued the Navy for loss of habitat when one of its submarines smashed aground on the reef. Its propellers dug two deep trenches in the bottom as the sub tried to free itself from the reef, which was estimated to be 3,000 years old. The Navy settled the claim for $750,000.

Now, the county and the Oceanographic Center at Nova are using the money to try to repair the damage, as well as study coral reef growth. The study is expected to last three years.

The study will also look at what type of fish are attracted to corals. Coral reefs, dubbed "rainforests of the oceans," are important because they provide habi tats for other sea creatures such as sponges, crabs and shrimp.

Researchers also plan on putting algae extract on some of the reef balls to see what type of sea life is drawn to the reef.

"Some fish destroy coral growth; other fish enhance it," Spieler said.

Living coral reef will be planted within the reef ball throughout the year to try to stimulate growth, said Ken Banks, manager of marine resource programs for Broward County.

"It's a cutting edge experiment with different hypotheses," Spieler said.