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## **New digs for sea creatures**

### **Teens help make artificial reefs**

**By Kristen Cox**  
*Times-Union staff writer*

From the decks of three small boats, rapt spectators watched Monday as a crane nudged hole-riddled, igloo-shaped chunks of concrete from a barge into the ocean 5 miles off Ponte Vedra Beach.

It might not sound exciting, but the onlookers knew something about the hollow concrete balls splashing into the ocean: In a few months, those drab chunks will become colorful homes for throngs of fish and give coral and algae a new place to grow.

More than 500 of the reef balls, some of which were built by marine science students at Mandarin High School, were deployed yesterday at a location called Bunny's Web. The individual balls will create a reef where sea creatures can thrive about 60 feet underwater, said Mandarin teacher Alex Waters, who helped his students construct about 15 balls of varying sizes.

"We're helping the environment," 17-year-old Mandarin student Matt Brown said. "I mean, if we make more reefs, more fish will live."

Brown and Waters joined about two dozen others to watch the balls dropped into the ocean yesterday. The \$85,000 project, called the Charles H. Kirbo Memorial Reef, was funded through the Atlanta-based Reef Ball Foundation, which is led by Kirbo's daughter.




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Workers with Reef Inovations deploy concrete reef balls into the Atlantic Ocean Monday about 5 miles off Ponte Vedra Beach. The reef balls will create a habitat where sea creatures can thrive.

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"He always fished in this area," Kathy Kirbo said of her father, who was an Atlanta lawyer and served as an adviser to President Jimmy Carter. "He was a great fisherman and conservationist."

The artificial reef can be used for scuba diving, fishing and marine education.

Reef Ball Development Group Ltd. of Bradenton provided the fiberglass molds to make the reef balls. Since 1992, the company has deployed more than 100,000 balls around the world, president Todd Barber said.

Artificial reefs have been used before in the form of junk or old ships in order to lure fish to a specific spot, but reef balls also provide places for young fish to grow, Barber said.

And it's becoming big business: Georgia-based company Eternal Reefs mixes concrete for the balls with cremated remains to create a "living memorial," company president Don Brawley said.

Each ball, Barber said, supports the production of 400 pounds of fish per year, and the balls are built to last at least 500 years.

About 10 years after the balls are deployed, he said, coral will have covered them to mimic a natural coral reef. The Reef Ball Foundation requires that its projects also be used for education, so Waters' diving-certified students will be able to scuba dive to the site to monitor its growth.

"We try to make all of our projects community events," Barber said.

St. Augustine students also helped create some of the reef balls, which can be as heavy as the 4,000-pound "Ultra Balls." It would take 1,000 years for nature to generate a coral reef the size of a 4-by-6-foot ultra ball, Barber said.

"We're jump-starting the ecosystem by decades, by eons," he said.



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