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Wednesday, August 22, 2001

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Reef balls restore marine life

Teacher shares love of the sea with students

By Kandace Lankford
Staff writer

 [Video of the reef balls](#)



As a boy, Alex Waters heard the song of the sea.

His childhood dreams of exploring candy-colored coral reefs and examining aquatic ecosystems followed him into adolescence and as his father's military career moved the family from coast to coast, he was increasingly drawn to immerse himself in learning about what lies beneath the liquid blue.

Mandarin High School biology teacher Alex Waters shares his love of the sea with his students about complex subaquatic communities. Reef balls, dome-shaped concrete structures filled with hollow artificial reefs.

-- Kandace Lankford

Today, Waters shares his passion for the ocean with his Mandarin High School students; he teaches marine biology. But his lessons go deeper than classroom lectures and textbook training.

Under Waters' tutelage, students not only learn about complex subaquatic communities, they also help cultivate those communities by creating underwater habitats known as reef balls.

The reef balls -- dome-shaped concrete structures filled with hollow artificial reefs, are strategically dropped into the ocean, where they act as artificial reefs, restoring marine life where natural reefs have been damaged or destroyed, creating a reef where none previously existed.

"I like to keep my class interesting, keep it fun and keep it hands-on," Waters said. "The reef ball program is the most hands-on program I've ever seen. I imagine."

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Christen Murphy, a student who took Waters' marine biology year, said being in his class and participating in the reef ball inspired her to change her career path. She had planned to major in marine mammal psychology, but after taking Waters' class and learning more about marine life, she decided to also pursue a marine veterinary degree.

"Of all the teachers I've ever known, Mr. Waters is the best at getting the kids involved," Murphy said. "He makes kids want to learn."

Along with inspiring his students, Waters also impressed his students at Mandarin High School, who voted him teacher of the year for 2000. Additionally, he was voted teacher of the year for the region, which includes three other high schools.

"He is an excellent teacher, coach, mentor and motivator," said Dr. Threadcraft Jr., principal of the high school. "The reef ball project has been very successful here and regionally because of him."

Waters' accomplishments were also recognized at the state level last year. He received the Florida Marine Educators Association educator of the year award, and his class -- one of only eight in the nation -- received an award, including a \$10,000 grant, from the World Environment Excellence Award recognizing the outstanding efforts of students across the country working at the grass-roots level to protect and preserve the environment, an award that was commended for providing students with a unique educational opportunity and garnering the community support to make it possible.

"We stood head and shoulders above the rest because of the community support we received," Waters said.

Besides educating others, Waters gives back to the ocean by serving as president of the Jacksonville Reef Research Team, a non-profit volunteer organization that uses research diving to deploy, maintain and enhance off-shore artificial reefs.

The team, which has about 35 active divers, performs three types of dives: pre-deployment dives to determine where reef balls should be placed; mapping dives to see exactly how the balls lie after they are dropped; and monitoring dives to count the fish that inhabit the reefs.

Waters said his personal goal is not necessarily to make more fishermen, but to provide his students with a project that makes them aware of stewardship and providing a habitat for maintaining biodiversity.

"Reefs are the most biologically diverse ecosystem on Earth

"They are one of nature's crown jewels."



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