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New artificial reef idea is bounced around

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A new kind of artificial reef being tested in Palm Beach County has the eye of environmentalists and recreational fishermen alike, both looking for inexpensive ways to beef up the dwindling fish population. It's called Reef Ball, the brainchild of a father-son inventing team from Atlanta who concocted the idea on a sailing and scuba excursion-to the Cayman Islands a couple years ago.

"We kept hearing about people dumping all of this concrete over the sides of boats and tearing up the reefs more than helping them," said Todd Barber, who quit his job this week to begin marketing the patented Reef Ball. "So, we got to thinking about covering a beach ball with concrete so we could sink it by letting the air out a little at a time," he said. "It blew my mind when I found out no one else had thought of it before."

Invention roots in beach balls

Since: then, it's become a little more complicated. Reef Balls are bigger than beach balls – they can be made just about any size, but the prototypes are about four feet high and weigh 6,000 pounds - and they're sort of bell-shaped, so they don't roll.

The Barbers added holes and crannies to support more fish, but the concept is the same. The contraptions are designed to be lighter and easier to place than other artificial-reefs, so they are less likely to cause damage. And they're cheaper, Barber said.

Three Reef Balls are being tested in the ocean off the Lake Worth beach. Barber also donated one to the Gumbo Limbo Nature Center in Boca Raton, where it has been on display since Tuesday. Barber explained the concept to hundreds of Palm Beach County schoolchildren who toured the center this week.

Environmentalists tout artificial reef programs as a way to build up a fish population dwindling because of pollution, over-fishing and too much diving on natural reefs.

In some cases, old or abandoned ships are scuttled as reefs. Typically, though artificial reefs are constructed of materials such as concrete sewage pipe that failed inspection or broken limestone. These materials are inexpensive to obtain, but costly to move and sink.

"It costs about \$3,000 per hour for all the cranes and barges they need to sink concrete pipe,"

Barber said. A Reef Ball can be sunk by a single-diver in a 10-foot boat, he said.

"And there's no guesswork about where it will end up on the bottom," he said. "You put it exactly where you want it to go. If you want to move it later, just put the flotation bag back in it."



John Pineda / Miami Herald Staff

TAKING A DUNK: Leslie Boyd, 24, checks over the 2 1/2-ton artificial Reef Ball at the Gumbo Limbo Nature Park.

It costs \$80 to \$500 for materials and manpower to sink each Reef Ball, he said. "If they can do it for \$500 a ball, that's a great price," said Ben Mostkoff, head of Dade County's artificial reef program. "But since the hurricane hit, we're being really careful goes down as artificial reef material. Mostkoff said Reef Ball manufacturers have to prove the balls will withstand 50-year storm surges without moving or roving. "If they can do that, it looks like a great idea."