

REEF

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Biology class sinks giant concrete balls for artificial reef

into the bulldozer's mouth.

The project was a lesson in life, the students said. They learned how government bureaucracy works, by applying for permits and grants. They learned how business works, by drumming up sponsors and donors. They learned the complex way cement works by experimenting with various mixtures to produce the perfect reef ball.

And those that didn't have it already got their scuba diving certification.

"We got to butt heads with bureaucracy," said Brian Tingler, the Spanish River graduate in charge of the permitting process.

"It teaches you it's not easy," said Cristina Hernandez, who plans to major in marine biology in college. "It took us a full school year to get these balls into the ocean. You learn to take rejection really well."

Originally, the plan was to sink the reef balls off the coast of Boca Raton. But the federal and state permits weren't approved in time, so teacher Ken Weemhoff chose to sink them at a Palm Beach reef, where the county already had permits.

To get to their destination, the

"These things are built like ... well, you could move into one of those things during a hurricane."

— Ken Weemhoff, teacher

balls hitched a ride on a county-leased barge being used for another artificial reef project.

The balls will enhance the artificial reef off Palm Beach, said Jim Vaughn, county environmental specialist.

"Things like the reef balls will add complexity," he said. "We've been meaning to go back and add more material, add more small spaces. We had no holes or cavities for smaller fish."

Tingler, 18, said he had gone diving in the area off Boca Raton where the balls originally were supposed to go and said the permit may still go through.

"Next year's class will be a couple of steps ahead of us," he said.

Nancy Seali came with son Mike, 17, to the event. Mike was the student in charge of the cement-mixing effort.

"He was bringing home a lot of cement on the car," she said. "The kids really enjoyed the work."