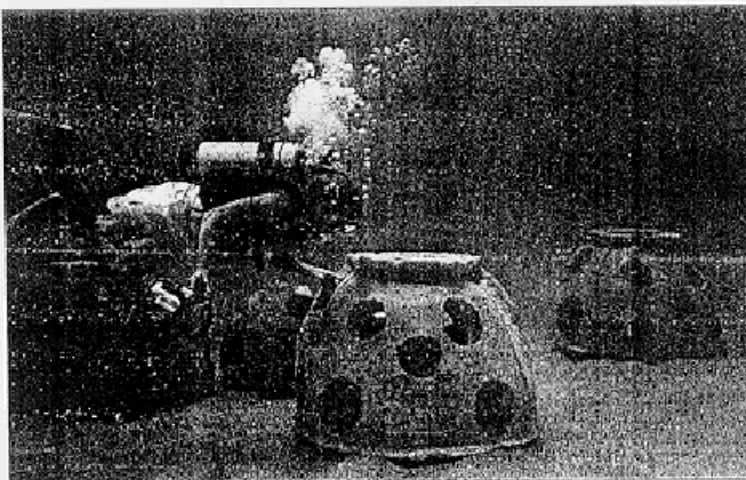


► ENVIRONMENT

# New life under the sea

Brian Tingler, 19, of Spanish River High School, examines a reef ball he helped develop in an artificial reef deployment and construction class.



By WENN/SPECIAL TO THE BOCA RATON NEWS

## Spanish River students make habitats for the ocean floor

By Paula Sorn  
STAFF WRITER

As a crane lowers a 1,500-pound whiffle ball-like structure from a barge into the aqua-blue waters off Palmetto Park Road, a small band of students know they've changed the world, or at least a small part of it.

The 45 cement reef balls laying a half-mile from shore mark the end of Ken Weemhoff's second Artificial Reef Deployment and Construction class at Spanish River High School.

"All the hard work you guys did is finally paying off," the biology instructor said, his eyes fixed on the ball that will become home to thousands of sea creatures.

"I can hardly believe it," said Brian Tingler, 19, who has worked on the project since it began two years ago.

That's when Weemhoff told him about Todd Barber, president and CEO of The Reef Ball Development Group and Foundation of Sarasota. Weemhoff and Barber had met at a Dive Equipment Marketing Association convention.

Barber started the idea of reef balls eight years ago, after Hurricane Gilbert destroyed his favorite diving spot. Friends helped him design the structures and they had the first ones on ocean floors in 1992.

Since then, the foundation has assisted 250 projects, dropping more than 40,000 reef balls around the world.

Barber donated his molds to the Spanish River students and answered their questions.

The rest was up to the students, the senior classes of 1997 and 1998.

The teens scouted for a location, wrote grant proposals, coordinated fund-raisers, applied for the necessary

permits, talked to politicians and experts, snagged a concrete donor and built the reef balls. They earned about \$20,000 in grants over that time from the Junior League, Turner Broadcasting's Captain Planet, Sea World-Busch Gardens and Northern Life.

On Tuesday, all the students had to do was watch their creations sink to bottom of the sea. Nature does the rest.

In three to six months, Weemhoff said, the balls will be completely encrusted with sea life, like the dozen his first class placed off the shore of Palm Beach last summer.

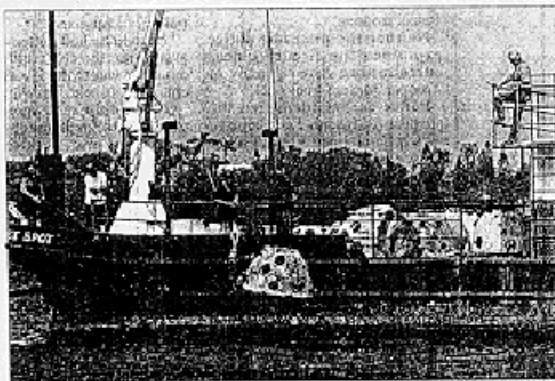
A typical reef ball accumulates about 100 pounds of biomass a year, Barber said.

At the Boca Raton location, fish began claiming their stakes within minutes.

"We've already got our first tenant, a sand perch," Barber said after diving in for a closer view and a few photos.

Although Weemhoff and his students say their primary goal was restoring marine life to an area damaged by erosion and boat anchors, their efforts also gave them a knowledge they can't find in ordinary classrooms and books.

"You learn a lot about the world and the way it works," said Spanish River senior Kim Bernheim, 18, who plans to study marine science at the University of Miami this fall. □



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Barge workers lower a reef ball into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Boca Raton on Tuesday.

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