

ENVIRONMENT

Students create reefs balls for fish

By VANESSA BAUZA
Staff Writer

Forget about mink and panda suits. Some students at Spanish River Community High School are excited about reef balls.

A group of seniors will use the jagged, hollow, concrete domes to build an artificial reef this year as part of a new marine biology class. With nooks and crannies for fish and other ocean life, the reef balls can weigh up to 3,000 lbs. But these 11 seniors are ready for the hefty task. They were hand-picked by their marine biology teacher, Ken Weerhoff, to participate in the class and are now taking over the project. "In a normal class the teacher is in charge," said student Kendall Lawn. "Here we're in charge."

The students will pour the concrete into fiberglass reef ball molds, adding a powder to strengthen it and equalize its pH with the sea water.

Ideally, they plan to build about 150 reef balls, which are about 4 feet tall and 5 feet wide, and then deploy them with a barge in the spring.

One possible site is south of the Boca Raton inlet, where the water is 65 to 100 feet deep.

All the students are getting

scuba-diving certifications so they can identify the growth on the reef balls in the months after they've been deployed.

But building a reef is no cheap proposition. The students are waiting for a \$12,000 Department of Education grant to cover the cost of scuba gear, concrete, barge rentals and reef site permits. They already have received a \$2,000 from the Captain Planet Foundation and the Reef Ball Development Group has lent them two reef ball molds at no cost.

A career in marine biology may be in many of their futures. "I grew up in Fort Lauderdale," said Samantha Burns. "I was practically born at the beach. I love to study (the ocean) and find ways to protect it."

Throughout the year the seniors plan to visit elementary and middle schools to spread the word about marine conservation to younger students.

According to Gordon Gilbert, director of the Gumbo Limbo environmental education center, artificial reefs can help replenish our oceans by providing safe habitats for plants and animals.

"With the increase in fishing we're soon depleating (our waters)," said Gilbert. "If we can put out more artificial reefs it will benefit fish, crabs, and all the

miscellaneous organisms that live in a reef community."

Reef balls were developed about four years ago and have already been deployed off the coasts of Palm Beach and Broward counties, and also in the Gulf of Mexico and off the coast of North Carolina, Weerhoff said.

Environmentalists and others used to sink old ships to create artificial reefs, but the reef balls have the added benefit of using waste concrete, which usually goes to a landfill or dump, Weerhoff added. Artificial reefs can grow fast in a matter of hours. Within a four to six months colonial

anemones, barnacles and sea urchins are growing.

The reef ball project will continue when next year's marine biology students study the success of the artificial reef.

And what might divers see when they explore our coastal waters in years to come? Lawn suggests that perhaps they will encounter an artificial reef which spells letters SRH, a testament to the students' alma mater.

To learn more about the Spanish River Community High School's Reef Ball project, contact Ken Weerhoff at 561-241-2200.



Staff photo/AMVPH

Cristina Hernandez, 17, of Spanish River Community High School, chips away at the holes formed in the reef ball.



Students remove mold from around a reef ball.