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## Private artificial reef may be in your fishing future

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By Jim Hardie

Between St. Lucie Inlet and the tip of Cape Canaveral there is a vast sandy ocean bottom with only a small percentage of natural or artificial reef.

For years, a lot of fishermen have dreamed of having their own private fishing hole. A spot where they can reel in bragging-size catches on demand.

Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

Wouldn't it be neat to have a spot that only you knew about, that you could run to out of St. Lucie or Fort Pierce Inlet.

After a glance or two over your shoulder to make certain no one was watching to learn the location of your secret spot, you drop down a bait and start reeling in big grouper and snapper!

Fishermen even have a name for such a private fishing spot - "Honey hole."

Believe it or not, this fishing fantasy is becoming a reality in the Gulf of Mexico off the Florida Panhandle.

If you had a piece of swiss cheese in the shape of a tennis ball and cut it in half, you would have the shape and appearance of this fishing dream.

It is called a Reef Ball. But it is slightly bigger - make that much bigger - than a tennis ball. A real-life Reef Ball is made of concrete and weighs 4,000 pounds. It is 4 feet high.

You might call the Reef Ball an underwater condo for fish, especially grouper and snapper.

After the Reef Ball is in the water awhile, marine organisms begin to grow, small fish move in, then larger fish ... and finally you, the sponsor of this private spot, arrives at the surface with rod and reel in hand.

"So far we have put down a little over 40,000 Reef Balls, about 10,000 of them in Florida State waters, said Todd Barber of Sarasota.

Todd and his father, Jerry, came up with the idea for the Reef Ball eight years ago while on a skin diving vacation in the Cayman Islands.

"I had visited the Cayman Islands as a kid and was amazed at the number and variety of fish on the reefs, Todd said. "When I came back as an adult, I was amazed again ... at how the number of fish on the reefs had declined.

According to Todd, six years of research and development went into perfecting the Reef Ball.

"The whole idea was to make something simple, inexpensive but most importantly, something which helped develop a fish population, Todd said.

The Reef Ball has proven to be more effective than its creators imagined; it attracts grouper, snapper and a variety of bottom fish.

Bill Lindberg, associate professor at the University of Florida's Department of Fisheries, says an artificial reef can boost

fish population by about 8 percent.

If a reef site is over-fished, it can result in a decrease fish population.

This is what makes the Reef Ball special. If the specific location of a Reef Ball is known to only one or two fishermen, they are going to protect their "Honey Hole" and keep the site secret. The overall effect of thousands of Reef Balls, is a gradual build-up of bottom fish populations. As individuals concentrate on their own private fishing spot, it takes away angling pressure from other reef areas.

The one-time cost of a Reef Ball to a sponsor is \$300. There are now 15 contractors making Reef Balls for the non-profit Reef Ball Development Group based in Sarasota. Todd Barber is head of Reef Ball Development.

"These things work. We now have Reef Balls offshore of every Panhandle County. On the Florida east coast, we have them in Dade and Broward Counties, Palm Beach County and in the Cape Canaveral area, Todd said.

Be nice if Martin County tried a few Reef Balls in our area. They work best in 60 feet of water or more.

One of Todd Barber's goals is to build the largest artificial reef in the world - one mile long - off Pensacola. He and his father want to give the reef to the State of Florida on behalf of smallboat fishermen.

Dale Minnick and Bill Carson are licensed to build Reef Balls in the Pensacola area. They are seeking state and federal permission to use 114 square miles, 14 miles offshore in the Gulf, as an area to place Reef Balls.

"For \$300, we build and deploy a Reef Ball and give you - the sponsor - the GPS numbers to your own private fishing spot,

said Bill Carson. GPS numbers pinpoint a spot via satellite.

Todd Barber says he has been contacted by a spokesman for the Philippine Government to discuss placing possibly one million Reef Balls to help restore fishing in the islands.

Not everyone is thrilled at the prospect of fishermen with private "Honey Holes in the Atlantic Ocean or Gulf of Mexico. Some fishermen and scientists think the idea is outrageous, giving up public waters for private use.

What a lot of people do not realize is, many fishermen have been dumping things - cement blocks, 55-gallon drums, old refrigerators, etc. - to build their own reefs for decades.

Artificial fishing reefs are here to stay. In my view, the Reef Ball might be the fishing development of the 21st Century ... it arrived a couple of years early.

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