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The Reel World with Capt. Ralph Allen

### **What's Up with the Reef Balls?**

Here's a quick fishing trivia question: What is found in Charlotte County, weighs nearly a third of a million pounds, and is soon going to be helping anglers catch more fish? The answer is: A pile of hundreds of concrete reef balls currently being stored at the Krehling Industries concrete plant in south Punta Gorda. The first of these artificial reef units are scheduled to be deployed in the harbor in two weeks.

So how has the Krehling Industries site come to be the home for hundreds of concrete artificial reef units? A non-profit group called the "Charlotte Harbor Reef Association", currently headed by co-managers Jerry Jensen and Fred Counter, was formed two years ago with the purpose of enhancing fishing in Charlotte County waters through the creation of underwater fish habitats (artificial reefs). After much organizational work, the selling of memberships and going after several government grants, the Charlotte Harbor Reef Association set to work pouring concrete reef balls.

Krehling Industries plant manager Joe Roberts agreed to donate the use of their property for the huge job. Krehling Industries yard master Jeff Taylor logged an estimated 36 miles of running around the yard with a front-end loader moving and stacking the hundreds of reef balls during the construction stages. This effort was also donated by Krehling Industries. The work of setting up molds, pouring concrete, and taking molds apart was accomplished through the efforts of 42 volunteers (mostly from the Punta Gorda Isles Fishing Club). The result is rows and rows of reef balls looking for underwater homes.

Just what is a reef ball? It's a weird looking, sort of spherical hollow concrete ball which is actually specially designed as an underwater fish habitat. Design features include thicker walls near the bottom and thinner walls towards the top so it won't roll around in a storm. Holes all around the sides allow fish to enter and exit the ball, and a large hole in the top prevents water pressure from lifting the ball off the bottom. The concrete itself is commercial grade with additives included to nearly match the pH of the concrete to that of saltwater. The surface of the concrete is intentionally made coarse so marine growth including barnacles, oysters, tunicates and

other things can easily establish themselves. The reef balls are estimated to have an underwater lifespan of 250 years.

The reef balls found at the Krehling Industries site come in three different sizes. There is a 48" by 36" size called a pallet ball which weighs in at around 1900 pounds, a 36" by 24" size called a bay ball which weighs in at around 550 pounds, and a 24" by 18" lo-pro ball which weighs in at around 90 pounds. These different sized balls have been produced for three different projects in Charlotte Harbor.

The first actual deployment of these reef balls is slated for Thursday May 6, when 35 of the large balls and 70 of the medium-sized balls will be deployed by barge at the south end of the existing artificial reef off the mouth of [Alligator Creek](#). Those of you who fish this reef know that while the material already there attracts great numbers of fish, there are large areas in the southern half of the reef where there is little or no structure. This first reef ball deployment should help fill that void. If you're out on the harbor on Thursday May 6 then swing on over to the reef where you can see the barge and crane deploying the reef balls.

The second reef ball project is the placement of reef balls directly under public fishing piers in Punta Gorda. The piers at Laishley Park, Gilchrist Park and at the new Punta Gorda Nature Park will have an assortment of small and medium-sized reef balls placed under them around the bases of the pilings. This will provide additional habitats at each of these locations, sure to be welcomed by the hundreds of fishermen that frequent these piers.

The third reef ball project is an interesting one that involves placing small reef balls under residential docks in the city of Punta Gorda. When the canals in Punta Gorda were dredged, quite a bit of natural fish habitat was destroyed. By putting two of the smallest reef balls under a dock, some of the missing habitat is replaced. Because the company which supplies the reef ball molds donated the use of some of them for this project and because of the efforts of the volunteers making the reef balls and because of a grant from the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program, these reef balls can be made available to homeowners on saltwater canals in the city limits of Punta Gorda at no charge. Enough of the small reef balls have been made to place under 90 docks and so far 70 people have signed up, probably hoping to attract fish to their own miniature artificial reefs. If you're interested in having reef balls under your dock in Punta Gorda call Jerry Jensen at 637-0005 to sign up. There is a one-time fee of \$40 paid to the two person team which will bring the reef balls to your house, carry them out to the dock, go into the water under your dock and level the bottom, then place the Reef Balls under the dock.

These last two projects (fishing piers and residential docks) are on hold right now awaiting final permit approval from the Department of Environmental Protection. Permit approval is expected very soon and all the units should be placed before the end of the year.

Let's Go Fishing!

*Captain Allen is the 1999 CCA Conservationist of the Year. He owns and operates the King Fisher Fleet of deep sea fishing, back bay fishing and sightseeing excursion boats from Fishermen's Village in Punta Gorda and can be reached by phone at 639-0969 or e-mail at [captain@kingfisherfleet.com](mailto:captain@kingfisherfleet.com) for fishing or boating information or with any questions.*

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