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Fate of Reefballs in DEP's hands

State inspectors voice concerns; tourism advocates embrace project

By Jim Hunter
Staff writer

County tourism officials should let the state know whether the state will give a thumbs up or down to the county's proposed Reefball site in the reef between Crystal River and Homosassa.

State environmental officials went out to the site with tourism board officials Monday for a third time to look at the bottom where the artificial reef posts will be placed — if the state grants a permit.

Two tourism committee members Sam Lyons, as well as other Citrus officials who went along, were anxious Monday and expressed frustration that they haven't been able to get the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to go along with the committee's proposal.

They have already modified the project design and made various concessions to please the DEP like putting the Reefballs in groups on slabs to keep them from moving in storms. The county also has agreed to allow the DEP to supervise placement of the slabs.

DEP officials said they would get back to the county today with their assessment of the site.

Merridy Toledo, an environmental supervisor on the site Monday said the problem is that there are "resources" or plant life on the bottom of the site, in addition to the fact that the water is only 5 to 6 feet at low tide and the rule for artificial reefs is no less than 6 at any time. Those conditions wouldn't normally

allow what the state permits for artificial reef, she said, but she also noted that what the county is doing isn't exactly a classic artificial reef designed to enhance fish populations as it has done heretofore with other materials.

The tourism board wants to create a shallow reef about 3 miles offshore, away from the main reef. They are planning to use something that would help maintain structure in the water for half of the year. It's not the organization for Artificial Reefs in Tallahassee — however, the site which Lyons said got a glowing recommendation.

The Reefballs are hollow, mushroom-shaped structures of varying size, covered with holes to the interior. They contain natural and recycled aggregate. The project would place 20 to 25 groups of Reefballs — 3 feet in diameter each — in four to six unit slabs on the bottom in a sort of underwater nature center or park, for tourists and students to observe.

The Reefballs quickly draw sea life and are expected to last hundreds of years, looking and acting like real coral foundations in just a few years, the designers said. As marine life attaches and takes up residence

the tourism board's idea is to buy the artificial reef posts from a Sarasota business and take advantage of a barge coming back from that location to get the Reefballs here and positioned on the bottom.

If the state doesn't tell the county it intends to issue a permit soon, though, the opportunity will be lost. Barge costs and logistics are some of the largest expenses in such a project, county officials say.

Taking advantage of that coincidental window of opportunity could save the county from \$20,000 to \$40,000, according to Citrus officials.

They would allow the county to get the reef project started by a jump start. The tourism board has raised the necessary money and has the support of the county commission for an initial

125-150 Reefballs, but time is running out for a decision on the permit.

"Tomorrow is D-Day," said Gary Hamilton on Monday. He is the county's interim director of development services and is leading the project.

Tourism officials are baffled as to why the DEP would not allow the Reefballs to be placed in the gully to create such a viable new habitat for sea life.

But Toledo said the area already is a habitat for natural sea life, including some grasses and algae that would be affected, and the department doesn't normally permit replacing one habitat with another.



Director of county... artificial reef... Monday to discuss the placement

There are also a lot of soft coral present in the area, according to Hamilton's Aquatic Sciences Committee. Both wanted the county permit members believe space exists to place only an artificial displaced. They life far outweigh amount of grass.

Ken Hamilton

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