



Each reef ball is stamped with the company's distinctive logo.

Times Photo — ROBERT ROGERS

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spent three hours unloading 185 concrete modules. It was part of a project, which began Monday morning, to create an artificial reef in a half square mile of 26-foot-deep water.

The county last year obtained a \$50,000 grant for the project from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The county then awarded the contract to Florida Mining and Materials.

The modules form the fourth artificial reef off Hernando's coast; the others were made from old Army tanks, and concrete culverts and rubble from the Sunshine Skyway bridge.

The latest reef, about a mile south of where 20 battle tanks were dropped in April, should create ideal habitat for marine life and a nice place for snorkelers and scuba divers to observe fish, organizers say.

"It's good for the company, good for the environment and good for the community," said J. Shelton Lee, district operations manager of Florida Mining and Materials, who was on board the 90-foot barge to watch the reef-building work. "It's a win-win situation all

around."

Florida Mining hired Reef Ball Development Group to design and help build the concrete modules. The company has built similar reefs off the coasts of South Carolina, Key West and Cape Canaveral.

The balls are designed to mimic coral reefs. The patented modules have many types of holes to support varieties of fish. The holes create water currents that anchor the balls to the sandy bottom. They have special surface textures and are made from pH-neutralized concrete to encourage the growth of coral and other marine life.

The concrete, which came from excess at Florida Mining's site near State Road 50 and Mariner Boulevard, was mixed with fibers and non-polluting hardening agents. The modules themselves are expected to last 500 years, but once coral takes hold, they can last indefinitely.

It took about six weeks to make the modules, which weigh 300 to 3,000 pounds. They were trucked a few days ago to Tarpon Springs, where they were loaded onto a 90-foot barge. The waters off Hernando Beach are too shallow to accommodate such a barge.

"Basically, you are recreating

an actual ecosystem," Smith said. "Algae will start growing on them in a few months. Then small sponges and corals."

Volunteers, especially members of the Hernando County Reef Explorers divers club, played a big part in the project.

Among them was Jim McFarlane, a physical education teacher at Central High School and owner of a dive shop in Spring Hill. McFarlane, 42, used an underwater video camera Tuesday morning to take shots of the modules as they were being dropped to the bottom of the sea bed. "It's the best project I've seen," said McFarlane, who also has taught biology.

McFarlane said he hopes to get school students involved in monitoring the reefs as they develop. "It's perfect for a school project," he said.

Michelle Richardson, a biology student at Pasco-Hernando Community College, helped to build and unload the concrete balls.

"I think it's a great idea to be doing something like this," said Richardson, 22, citing the deterioration of coral reefs. "I'd like to see more of it done."