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Environmental group plants oyster reefs that filter bay

An occasional article about activities on the south Pinellas waterfront.

By JON WILSON

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ST. PETERSBURG -- Oysters are growing in northeast St. Petersburg.

These aren't to eat, though the job they're doing helps clean Tampa Bay water, which in turn might one day bring about the return of edible shellfish here.

Tampa BayWatch, an environmental group with headquarters on Snell Isle, is in charge of this bivalve batch.

BayWatch is making oyster reefs, small enough for a couple of strong people to wrestle them over seawalls and into the many finger canals that poke into waterfront subdivisions around town.

BayWatch will be happy to give one of the reefs to residents who have a seawall. In return, the resident monitors the biological activity around and in the reef.

The reefs are conical devices with variously sized holes in them. They remain secure in a few feet of water. Pretty soon oysters start growing on them. More oysters grow on the ones that arrived first.

About 30 of these "Reef Balls," whose molds are provided by the Reef Ball Development Group, rest at

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the seawall behind St. Raphael's Catholic School. George Orsi's eighth-grade science classes helped with the project.

In about nine months, scores of oysters 2 1/2 to 3 inches long have sprouted. Each oyster can filter a liter of water per hour, said Peter Clark, BayWatch director.

And the rascals work 24 hours a day.

"If we can get enough (reefs) out, I would hope they'd filter the water in the canals. That's the biggie," Clark said.

Besides vacuuming nutrients, which cloud water and retard sea-grass growth, the reefs provide habitat. Crabs and baitfish swim in and out of the reef's holes. Other critters, some of which also help the filtering process, hang on, too.

In addition to the St. Raphael's site, another 200 or so reefs are scattered in numerous canals created by dredge projects during St. Petersburg's era of heavy development.

The canals aren't suitable for mangroves, and they're probably not clean enough to support sea grass. But the oyster reefs are perfect, said Clark, the BayWatch director.

BayWatch's Bryon Chamberlin, Chris Sutton and Christine Klassen planted a half-dozen of them Friday morning behind a house in the Venetian Isles neighborhood.

They would like to put another 300 in the water during the next few months, Chamberlin said.

The reefs come in two sizes: about 120 pounds and about 45 pounds.

BayWatch builds them at a St. Petersburg Yacht Club outpost marina just off Snell Isle Boulevard.

Boy Scout troops are welcome to get involved in the project, for example. So are school classes like St. Raphael's, neighborhood associations and condominium groups. Or individuals, for that matter.

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Volunteers are always welcome.

Call 896-5320 for information about getting a reef.

* * *

A century ago, plume hunters virtually exterminated roseate spoonbills around Tampa Bay and the Pinellas peninsula.

It has taken almost that long for the pink birds with the flat bills to start reappearing in numbers.

But Clark last week counted 72 around the natural "amphitheater" inside Tarpon Key, about a half-mile west of the Sunshine Skyway's approach spans.

"In the late 1970s or early '80s, we started seeing one or two coming back from the Everglades," Clark said.

Their reemergence is evidence of an environmental success story, even though it took a long time.

"We just saw the 72," Clark said. "I'm sure there are more around."

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