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Todd Barber holds miniature models of the reef balls as volunteer's work on a mold.

Couple hopes invention revives coral reefs

By Dena Smith

STAFF Writer

How often do you think about homeless fish?

If you thought about the fact that our reef systems are being destroyed at a much faster rate than they can rebuild themselves: and that human activity is the major cause of the destruction, then maybe thinking about homeless fish is not shallow.

Laura Shellhorse and Todd Barber have stopped just thinking about the world's oceans and are doing something about it. The husband and wife team have developed an innovative artificial reef design that will help relieve man-made stress on natural reefs at less cost and more effectively than other attempts.

They call it a "Reef Ball."

It is made from customized molds that contain an internal, inflatable device, somewhat like an inner-tube. A hose inflates and deflates the inner-tube, allowing the Reef Ball to float to a location and then sink to the bottom. The lining of the mold is designed to create a rough-edged, honeycomb-shaped surface structure that enables coral growth.

Operating out of their Doraville home, or the homes of other volunteers, the couple has so far managed to build and deploy three of the reefs in the Atlantic off West Palm Beach, Fla. Their group, the Reef Ball Development Corp_ plans to build more in an effort motivated not by profit but by a desire to help the ocean environment. "Reefs provide a place for fish to breed and live," said Barber. "Fish produce millions of eggs that float around the water. By placing more reefs where needed, we're creating a piece for the eggs to develop. We may not be able to save coral, but we may be able to save the fish."

Until now, artificial reefs have been largely a government undertaking. According to Barber, reefs were built with unsightly construction rubble, old planes or ships, tires and other materials unsuitable for the landfills. But Reef Balls have overcome all of the disadvantages associated with artificial reef making, he said. "Ships are too costly and require extensive cleaning," said Barber. "And other types of structures are costly because barges with cranes are needed to deploy the structures, costing at least \$3,000 an hour."

Reef Balls can be towed out by recreational boats or even divers, saving thousands of dollars. The actual construction of the 4-foot-by-4-foot Reef Ball is inexpensive. With donated cement and volunteers to deploy the Reef Balls, expenses are kept to a minimum. The group donates the balls free for public use and charges only \$15 for those in private use.

The son of an inventor and scuba shop owner in Athens, the full-time business consultant said he's noticed the condition of marine life go from bad to worse over the years. "Think of the ocean as a forest, with corals being the trees," said Barber. "Without trees much of the wildlife cannot exist." The Reef Ball Development Group is making it easy for others to join in the reef-making effort. Currently, the government requires a potential permittee to provide insurance or demonstrate the financial means for the liability incurred with reef building and have periodic inspection that's needed, Barber said.

The development group will apply for and hold the permits for individuals -- providing monitoring and maintenance services. But individuals or groups that wish to build a reef should plan several months in advance to allow time for the permits to be processed. To get involved contact Barber at 941-720-7549

"We couldn't do this without volunteers," said Barber.