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Reef balls could bring more life to May River

Hilton Head Island: Dive club hoping to raise enough money to buy 50 reef balls to bring life back to the May River's bottom.



By Rob Dewig
[Carolina Morning News](#)

The bottom of the May River may be as barren as a desert, but it doesn't necessarily have to stay that way. At least, that's what members of the Hilton Head Dive Club believe.

Hilton Head Dive Club president Amber Hester holds a model of the "reef balls" she hopes to add to the May River soon. The real thing, she says, would be a pyramid-shaped structure about 3-feet around and 4-feet tall.

Photo by [Kellie McCann](#)

Today, the river bottom consists merely of sand as far as the eye can see -- which in the murky water isn't really all that far. Still, club members say, the tides ripping in and out of the saltwater river tear almost anything living on the bottom away, leaving a bare, boring, lifeless aquascape.

They want to change all that.

At their monthly meeting last Thursday, club members agreed to try to raise enough money to buy 50 massive concrete "reef balls" to create an artificial reef -- or even a series of small reefs -- along the winding river's course.

Reef balls are large pyramids of porous concrete that allow footholds for all types of aquatic life, from fish to algae. A 3-

foot-by-4-foot ball costs \$200. So far, the 15-member club has bought five.

The club's reasons for wanting the reef balls in the river are three-fold, member Justin Kelley said.

First, the divers want something beside the occasional crab or skate to watch and they figure the reef balls will give them just that.

Second, it never hurts to help animals establish a foothold in an otherwise barren, tide-swept river, he said. Informational videos club members have watched show the balls are usually covered by algae and coral just a year after entering the water.

Third, the balls could act as repositories for fossils the tides might otherwise expose and carry away. Club divers often explore the river bottom searching for all types of ancient remains, from mastodon teeth to whale vertebrae. But the tide, Kelley says, takes its share, too.

Club president Amber Hester said the club hopes to establish a series of small reefs in the river, all sunk deeply to keep them out of the reach of whatever boats ply the water.

The reefs will be carefully marked by buoys, she said. Club members have agreed to monitor the reefs at least once each month, taking videos and tracking their progress.

"Coral is slow growing," she said. "It's not going to be like 'Shazaam! Growth!'"

The state Department of Natural Resources has regulatory power over what goes in its rivers, so Hester will still have to ask permission before the reef balls can enter the May. She expects the DNR will agree, but she has a backup plan just in case.

The DNR has approved reef balls for use in the ocean, including off Tybee Island in Georgia. It has also approved the use of old military equipment off Hunting Island. Hester believes the state will have no problem with making a small reef off Hilton Head, perhaps only a few miles out. But the May is unquestionably her first choice.

The nearest natural reef is Grays Reef, 26 miles offshore and completely out of the reach of small boats like Hester's.

"I definitely want one to be accessible to my boat so it can be checked," she said. "I want to make a research study out of it."

The Bluffton native has a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Georgia; she has applied for graduate school at Nova Southeastern University at Fort Lauderdale, Fla. She hopes to get a master's degree in marine biology.

Anyone can sponsor a reef ball, Hester said, simply by contacting the dive club. The reef balls can be personalized with the donor's name or a special message. Even the buoys marking the reefs can carry a message or monogram.

The reef balls, though made of concrete, are specially designed to be completely non-toxic, Hester said. They will be only good for an environment heavy fishing has seriously harmed, she said.

"(Reef balls) could increase the fish population," she said. "There will be more food for them. There's more places for them to hide, to escape from predators."

Anyone wishing to donate to the club's reef ball project can call Island Scuba Dive & Travel at 689-3244 or Hester at 298-0133. Donations of any amount will be accepted, Hester said.

The dive club meets the second Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. at Island Scuba Dive, located just off Mathews Drive. The public is invited.

What is a reef ball?

Reef balls, a term trademarked by the Woodstock, Ga.-based Reef Ball Foundation, are massive concrete structures specially designed to support underwater life.

The balls, according to the foundation's Internet site -- <http://www.reefball.org/> -- are made by pouring virtually any type of concrete into a fiberglass mold. The concrete used must contain various additives to make it non-toxic for aquatic life. The concrete itself is porous, providing firm footholds for algae and other tiny life forms.

The mold contains a specially made "bladder" that is connected to various sized inflatable balls. Concrete is then added to the mold. After the concrete hardens, the bladder and air-filled balls are removed, leaving a reef ball filled with holes that offer fish a place to hide from predators.

The structures usually resemble pyramids more than balls, with a heavy square base used to anchor them to the bottom. Within a year, the ball is usually covered with underwater life.

A 3-foot-by-4-foot ball costs about \$200.

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