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Chesapeake notebook: Group wants live-reef project to flourish

By John Page Williams, For The Capital

If life hands you lemons, make lemonade." Anglers and charterboat captains in the middle Bay are taking that maxim seriously. The Gas Docks just above Cove Point will begin accepting shipments of liquid natural gas this spring. Dominion Resources Company, the docks' owner, will close the waters around them to all unrelated vessels, with the closure supervised by the U.S. Coast Guard.

For nearly 30 years, the Gas Docks have served as an extraordinary complex of fishing reefs, attracting rockfish, gray trout, bluefish and flounder. On any given day in season, 30-50 boats gathered there to set chumlines, drop jigs or deploy live baits around the pilings, whose hard surfaces attracted a broad variety of Bay creatures, from mussels, barnacles and marine worms to grass shrimp, blue crabs and small fish.

Two hundred years ago, this kind of "live bottom" grew on thousands of acres of oyster reefs. As overharvest, pollution, and disease have destroyed the oysters, the Bay has lost much of this keystone habitat. Thus, a prominent structure like the Gas Docks becomes a magnet for Bay creatures in its area.

The docks will continue to function as a haven for fish, which is fine with a lot of anglers in the area, but they need alternative sites for their trips, and those sites must also be clear of target practice areas used by the Patuxent Naval Air Station. Last year, a group of anglers in the Solomons area came together to plan a major project for building live reefs from Cove Point down to Point No Point.

This is a fascinating section of the Chesapeake. As part of the Bay's ancestral Susquehanna River channel, it's narrow and deep, with strong currents, sharp-breaking edges, underwater shelves and shallow flats on the sides. It's also the main highway along which every fish and crab traveling between the upper and lower Bay must move. We can only speculate about how rich it must have been when oyster reefs lined those edges, shelves and flats.

The leaders in the reef project are far-sighted enough to understand

that fish stocks will flourish in the area only if the reefs are properly built, so they supply the ecosystem functions that the natural ones did years ago. "I really want live bottom oyster reefs, with the water filtration and habitat they offer," said Capt. John Mayer, president of the Solomons Charter Captains' Association at a meeting here last week.

Mr. Mayer's group has joined with the Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association and the Southern Maryland Chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association/Maryland to form the Chesapeake Bay Artificial Reef Coalition. The Coalition's first move was to contact the Maryland Environmental Services, a public/private agency that took over operation of Maryland's artificial reef program from the Department of Natural Resources in 1997, operating under reef permits issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Picking an appropriate site is the most fundamental step in the process. Fortunately, the collected wisdom of the three-partner organizations is considerable. These anglers have bounced sinkers on and looked through their depth sounders at these bottom features for years. Together, they know this part of the Bay as well as they know the cockpits of their boats.

The first site is a shelf in 40-60 feet of water off the southern end of Taylor's Island, with 100 feet of water outside and a collection of humps and flats inside. Last October, the Coalition and MES found some 150-foot-long steel girders encrusted with concrete from an old bridge and hired McLean Contracting to place them in a V-shaped pattern on the shelf, to form the Taylor's Island Artificial Reef. MES has located three old barges that will go onto the site next. The Coalition plans to make the lat/lon coordinates of this reef and those of future ones widely available to the angling public.

The next step will be to build up the structure of this reef. The barges will provide platforms to prevent additional material from sinking into the bottom or being covered with shifting sand. Coalition members are actively searching for sources of appropriate recyclable materials like crushed concrete from bridge re-decking projects. Other possibilities include concrete igloo-shaped "reef balls" made by MSSA volunteers, oyster shell set with spat (baby oysters) by the Maryland Oyster Recovery Partnership, and chunks of marl (marine limestone) set with spat by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

To help pay for this first reef effort, the Solomons Charter Captains' Association will donate proceeds from its annual Fishing Fair and Seminars, which take place Feb. 22-23 at the Calvert County Fair Grounds (for information, contact Capt. Mayer at

240-417-2406 or visit www.fishsolomons.com) and from a fall fishing tournament. MSSA will donate the proceeds of several fishing fairs and flea markets (for information, call Capt. Bruno Vasta, MSSA President, at 410-326-2622). Other sources of

funding have expressed interest.

Once the flow of funds is established, the Coalition members will begin working with MES to develop up to five additional reef sites. This is no one-shot deal. These folks are committed long-term. Such well-planned grassroots partnerships are all too rare, but they can be crucial elements in restoring the bay's health. We'll keep an eye on this project and report progress from time to time.

John Page Williams is the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Senior Naturalist. He is based in Annapolis but travels all over the Chesapeake watershed to find people at work on local projects that restore the Bay's health. For an illustrated version of this column, log onto CBF's web site at <http://www.cbf.org/>.

- No Jumps-

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