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DISCOVERY

Businessman gives back to nature

Howard Lovy / The Detroit News

Shortly after Todd Barber learned to dive, he began taking pictures of some coral reefs in the Cayman Islands.

Fifteen years later, when he returned to see just how much his favorite reefs had grown, he discovered instead that they had been wiped out by a hurricane.

Out of this disappointment came a sense of mission.

Together with his father, inventor Jerry Barber, he developed his patented "Reef Ball" -- an artificial reef that mimics nature. Come back in a few years to a Reef Ball site, he said, and all you'll see are natural corals.

"Since I started diving when I was 15 years old, 70 percent of the coral reefs that were around when I was there are no longer in existence. We've taken what I consider one of the greatest ecosystems -- perhaps next only to the rain forest in terms of species diversity -- and we've decimated over 70 percent of them. I felt like we've got to put something back."

Causes for the major loss of corals include:

- * Sewage and fertilizer runoff. Increased nitrates and ammonia in the water raise the potential for algae to grow all over the corals and kill them.
- * Natural disasters such as hurricanes.
- * Global warming is a possibility. As evidence, Barber points to coral bleaching. Corals have a kind of algae that grows inside their skin and will flee if the temperature gets above 92 degrees and oxygen levels drop. Barber said episodes of coral bleaching have been lasting longer over the past 15 years resulting in the death of more corals.

His Reef Ball company has been in existence for five years. Now, his company is contributing to an ambitious project to completely restore the reefs of Puerto Rico.

"You wake up in the morning and really feel good about what you're doing," said Barber, who does not get paid for his efforts. Neither do his 27 volunteers. "The money's not there but that just doesn't matter when you can wake up and say, 'I'm really doing something positive for the world.'"

"There are really very few things left in the world where individuals can make that kind of an impact on

the environment. I look back and say, 'This year, I've built 10,000 coral reefs.' Nobody else in the world can say that."

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