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Eternal Rest With the Fishes, as a Part of an Artificial Reef

By IVER PETERSON

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OCEAN CITY, N.J., Sept. 21 - To the many ways Americans can honor the remains of the dearly departed - blasting their ashes into space or freezing the remains or simply sealing the body in a coffin, among others - add one more option: mixing the cremation ashes with marine-grade concrete and forming an artificial reef, a home for the fish and the coral.

So it was that on Tuesday, along with decommissioned Army tanks that have already been lowered to the sandy ocean floor off South Jersey, the mortal remains of three people were interred: Robert I. Aronson, an avid ocean fisherman; Cecelia Schoppaul, who could watch the surf for hours; and Charles M. Wehler, who hated swimming but loved the South Jersey shore.

Their ashes, and those of several others, were mixed with concrete and formed into reef balls, which are hollow concrete cones cast with grapefruit-size holes in them. The balls are widely bought by coastal states - but without human remains - and are used to create fish habitats offshore.

As members of the Aronson, Schoppaul and Wehler families watched from a chartered fishing boat about seven miles off Atlantic City's casino skyline, the towboat Defiant slowly slid the reef balls over the stern and into 50 feet of water. They became part of the Great Egg Reef, one of 14 artificial reefs created by the state.

"I couldn't let go of his ashes - they were the last physical part of him that I had," said Jamie Wehler of Westminster, Md., the widow of Charles Wehler, who died a year ago at 53. "But when I saw an article about this, there was no question in my mind. I don't believe in strange things happening, but everything about this entire trip has been right for me."

Others who had loved ones' ashes cast in reef balls that day spoke of the same sense of wanting to do something tangible with the ashes, besides simply storing them on a mantel or scattering them on the sea.

Kathy Yard recalled the wishes of her mother, Virginia B. Yard, who died on Christmas Eve 2000: "I have dogs that get on my shelves, and she made me promise that I wouldn't make her sit on my shelf. So when we read about this in the paper, we were immediately excited. After all, we all come from the sea, and we're all made up of salt water."

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David Hunsinger for The New York Times
Jamie Wehler views a reef ball of concrete and her husband's ashes.

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The cost of putting the ashes into the reef balls for those who buried a loved one on Tuesday ranged from \$1,000 to \$2,000, plus \$50 for the charter boat rental. It can run as high as \$5,000 depending upon the model of reef ball chosen.

The idea of adding human ashes to commercial reef balls came to Don Brawley of Atlanta when his father, late in life, expressed a wish to be buried at sea. An accomplished diver, Mr. Brawley knew that putting bodies into coastal waters is illegal, though scattering ashes is not. But he also knew of a company, Reef Ball Development Group, that cast reef balls of a patented design for sale to state fisheries departments. He wondered: Why not add human ashes and make the reef balls into memorials?

"Most states with reef programs buy artificial reefs," said George Frankel, co-owner of Eternal Reefs, the Decatur, Ga., company he founded with Mr. Brawley in 2001. "We like to think that we're buying public reef balls with private money."

Eternal Reefs has placed about 200 reef ball memorials since its founding, mostly along the Gulf Coast states. Tuesday's "placement," as they call it, is their farthest north. But the company is eager to begin selling in vacation and resort areas off the mid-Atlantic coast, since vacation spots - perhaps like cemeteries - are places that families return to time and again.

The company offers three sizes, of 400, 1,500 and 2,000 pounds, costing between \$1,000 and \$5,000. There are also two models for pets, for \$400 and \$500. The reef balls are cast with most of the weight at the bottom, to provide stability as the hollow design and holes dissipate energy from currents. The concrete used is nonacidic and the surface is roughened and dimpled, to encourage coral growth. A brass plaque marking the name and dates for the person being memorialized is included in the price.

Eternal Reefs also offers a "viewing," as they call it, when family members can make rubbings or write notes, in sidewalk chalk, on the smooth interior of the shell before it is put in the ocean.

Jessica Yard, 16, wrote, "I will make you proud" in pink chalk on the reef ball of her grandmother Virginia Yard, who raised her.

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