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NJ Environmental Dept using prison labor on fisheries project

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>*Prison work rehabilitates from the ocean floor on up*

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>*MAURICE RIVER TOWNSHIP, N.J. -- Look out, developers. New Jersey officials are getting ready to launch an innovative style of seashore housing -- for fish.*

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>*This week, state officials will plunk the fish "condos" into the ocean off Barnegat Light on Long Beach Island.*

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>*The gray concrete structures are the latest element of New Jersey's artificial-reef program, which is intended to create new habitat for fish and protect them from aquatic predators while providing new hot spots for fishermen and divers.*

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>*Though the "reef balls" -- their official name -- are used around the world to build artificial reefs, they are being manufactured in New Jersey by an unusual workforce: prisoners at the Southern >>State<< >>>Correctional<< >>Facility<< in Cumberland County.*

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>*The inmates, who earn \$1.60 to \$3.70 a day, use fiberglass molds to cast the poured concrete into 3-foot-by-4-foot structures that weigh 1,400 to 1,600 pounds each and look like igloos with holes. It is a back-breaking job, but prisoners said last week that it was satisfying work.*

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>*"It's like rehabilitation," said inmate Patrick Hellriegel, 52, who is doing time for aggravated manslaughter, as he prepared the molds for a new batch of concrete. "This is the first time I felt good in years, doing this kind of work. I know it's good for the environment."*

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>*Anthony Buddington, 35, of Jersey City, who is serving seven years for robbery, said he liked the idea of helping the fish.*

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>*"They need a home, too," he said.*

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>When the first group of reef balls is put into the ocean about four miles
>from shore on Tuesday, they will join an ever-growing number of sunken
>ships, military tanks and other structures that are slowly transforming the
>landscape of the ever-shifting sandy ocean floor off New Jersey. Reef balls
>provide a place for fish to hide, lay eggs or just swim -- as coral reefs
>do naturally in other places.

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>"The idea is that they mimic natural reefs," said Richard Christian,
>sport-fish restoration coordinator for the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries
>Commission.

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>Christian, whose agency is composed of marine-fishery representatives of
>states from Maine to Florida, said that New Jersey's program, administered
>by the Department of Environmental Protection Division of Fish, Game and
>Wildlife, was one of the most innovative because of the variety of items
>used to create reefs.

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>Since the program began in 1984, more than 1,200 reefs have been built on a
>network of 14 sites between Sandy Hook and Cape May. Even a chunk of the
>old Ben Franklin Bridge is now part of a reef off Cape May. There are
>tires, boats and barges, military vehicles -- and soon, the reef balls.
>This year's plans call for installing 600 reef balls as well as tanks and
>vessels that have been cleaned up and inspected so they will not hurt the
>environment.

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>Bill Figley, who is in charge of the reef program for the state DEP, said
>the reef-ball project was funded by the federal excise tax on fishing
>equipment. He said making, transporting and installing each reef ball cost
>about \$125.

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>The state also has an adopt-a-wreck program, through which clubs,
>organizations and individual participants can donate money to pay for the
>sinking of a wreck or other reef structure. Last year's adoptions included
>the sinking of about 20 Army tanks, including one sponsored by the
>Philadelphia chapter of the Explorer's Club.

>
>Andrew Applegate, who owns a fishing-party boat -- the Captain Applegate
>-- that goes out from Atlantic City and fishes above artificial reefs, said
>he believed the new reef balls, if properly placed, would attract fish and
>thus keep more fishermen and fisherwomen happy.

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>"I think they're going to work well," said Applegate, former president of
>the Artificial Reef Association, which has supported New Jersey's project.

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>Figley said the idea was pretty much that the artificial structures would
>attract fish -- crabs and lobsters, too -- and that they would make their
>way into the hollow interiors.

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>"The environment moves and makes it impossible for a lot of animals to gain
>a foothold and stay put and survive," Figley said.

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 >The structures also will provide a surface that encourages the growth of
 >algae, mussels, barnacles and other life forms that, in turn, become food
 >for the fish.
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 >Figley said the reef balls should attract an array of fish -- sea bass,
 >blackfish, triggerfish and others. He said the balls would be dropped into
 >the ocean in varying configurations; in some areas there may be as many as
 >20 or 30 of them plunked down in a type of housing subdivision.
 >
 >He said that once the reef balls become covered with underwater growth, the
 >holes disappear and the structures resemble coral. "They look fairly
 >natural," Figley said.
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 >The balls were designed by a group of divers who were looking for a way to
 >create a simple, affordable, environmentally sound way to replicate natural
 >reefs, said Todd R. Barber, president and CEO of Reef Ball Development
 >Group Ltd. in Sarasota, Fla.
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 >Barber said the first design, which resembled a beach ball, was gradually
 >refined into a structure that entices a multitude of species, does not move
 >in storms and uses concrete additives suitable for the growth of marine
 >life.
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 >He said the devices helped fish by allowing them to hide inside and avoid
 >predators and by giving them a place to rest. Small fry tend to survive
 >longer in reef balls, he said, and fish also can conceal themselves outside
 >the ball and wait for food -- smaller bait fish -- to swim by.
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 >"They just need a place to hide and hang out," Barber said.
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 >He said that there were now about 40,000 reef balls used in 400 projects
 >around the world in the waters from Australia to the Caribbean to the
 >Middle East, and that a new project will begin next week in Indonesia. New
 >Jersey's project is unusual, he said, because of the use of prisoners for
 >labor.
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 >At Southern State >>Correctional<< >>Facility<<, Hellriegel and a handful
 >of other prisoners were hard at work last week on the project -- a joint
 >effort between the state DEP and the state >>Department<< >>of<<
 >>>Corrections<<.
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 >"It's like I'm giving back something," said Hellriegel, a Passaic County
 >man who is serving a 20-year sentence with a 10-year mandatory minimum.
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 >For Willie Vaughan, 35, of Plainfield, serving three years for drugs, the
 >project enables him to do "something constructive" that is also good for
 >the environment.
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 >"It >>kills<< time, gets me in shape, gets my mind to focus on other
 >things," Vaughan said.

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>Andrew Morgan, 41, who is serving a seven-year sentence for eluding
>>>police<< in a high-speed chase, said he enjoyed the work and the whole
>notion that he was helping the fish.
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>Morgan, who is from the Manasquan area, said he grew up on the water, loved
>to fish and had three sons who also enjoyed fishing. When he is released,
>he said, he intends to head out to a rock jetty and tell people about the
>"fish bowls" he has helped build.
>
>"It fits right in with the environment," Morgan said. "The potential is
>great with these things."
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>For More Information
>For details on adopting a reef, contact the reef program at the New Jersey
>Department of Environmental Protection Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife
>at 609-748-2020 .

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