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Published: May 18, 2006 12:30 AM  
Modified: May 18, 2006 02:50 AM

# From the depths, artificial reefs provide concrete results

**RICHARD EHRENKAUFER, Correspondent**

BEAUFORT - North Carolina anglers are blessed with an abundance of man-made fishing reefs and accidental artificial reefs (we're not called the Graveyard of the Atlantic for nothing) that complement a multitude of natural rock and ledge formations.

Reef locations are marked on charts and with buoys at sea, but identifying what lies beneath can be tough. Line drawings, fuzzy sonar images and GPS locations only hint at the rubble, ships and debris.

Good reef anglers know what a reef is made of and what it holds. One angler with an even greater knowledge has taken close looks -- from the bottom up.

"I've done a lot of scuba diving in the area, and it's kind of interesting," fishing guide Tom Roller of Beaufort said. "I've dived the wrecks and a lot of the live bottoms. I have a good perspective from the top and bottom, and it's really helped me as an angler.

"As a diver, you not only want to learn with your own eyes what structure holds fish, but you start to get a better perspective of what you are seeing on the bottom."

Along the N.C. coast, man-made reefs are built and maintained by the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries and by local fishing clubs.

When Roller dives on the reefs, he discovers a variety of materials.

"If you look at any of the general artificial reefs, you'll see a lot of concrete rubble, whether it's pipe or reef balls, some aluminum and metal stuff from old aircraft, barges, ships and whatnot," said Roller, who runs Water Dog Guide Service. "Concrete is interesting -- it will hold a lot of life on it; there's a lot of coral on it -- whereas the aluminum degrades very fast, falls apart and disappears."

Reef balls also are important parts of reefs. The balls are honeycomb, domed structures that are made on land before being dropped to the ocean floor. Roller finds them "good for fish but very bad for tackle."

"They steal tackle," he said.

Many of the sites contain sunken ships. The popular sunken ship designated AR (artificial reef) 330 contains reef balls, concrete pipe, aircraft, boxcars and the remains of a 320-foot landing craft repair ship Indra.

"Yes, the Indra," Roller said with a smile. "It's a popular barracuda spot."

**Emphasis on variety**



A sand tiger shark cruises over concrete drainage pipes that make up part of AR 330.  
*Courtesy of N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries*

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The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries has an active artificial reef program. Go to [www.ncfisheries.net/reefs/index.html](http://www.ncfisheries.net/reefs/index.html) to find out more.

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Each reef ends up with its own personality because of its individual components, populations and hazards.

Because of the barracudas, Roller said, he often visits AR 330 during August and fishes with live bait.

"I've found some amazing things there, like hooking into a 40-pound barracuda," he said. "There are more barracuda on that place than you've ever seen.

"That's a real interesting wreck; it's a very high relief wreck but also has very, very large rubble fields around it, so there is a lot you can do there."

Closer in are AR 315 and AR 320. The popular sites a few miles south and west of Beaufort Inlet are littered with typical reef materials of concrete rubble and reef balls, aircraft and sunken ships. The 440-foot liberty ship Theodore Parker sticks up prominently at AR 315, and, an old fishing vessel, Novelty, anchors AR 320. Roller has made dives there, too.

"If you want to see what it is down there, you need to get there on a day with very good visibility, and particularly on wrecks like AR 315 and 320, it's not very common," Roller said. "You have a lot of water movement from the inlet; you can have 50 feet of visibility on the surface and one foot at the bottom."

For divers who do find good visibility, the bottom can yield quite a sight.

"What you are going to find is that there is a lot of concrete rubble on the thing, and it's amazing, the amount of monofilament [line] on the thing," Roller said. "It's like a jungle so you have to be very careful, and I'm not kidding."

#### **Reef residents**

Reefs and rubble attract baitfish, and with them predators.

"They all vary," said Roller, "but a lot of times once you approach the wreck, and you start to head downwards, you will start to see schools of fish."

Each species occupies a preferred level.

"You'll see schools of spadefish close to the surface, and then you'll run into spottail pinfish, which tend to hang above the wreck," Roller said. "There are always lots of barracuda in the summer; I've seen schools of 200 – easy!"

"As you work your way down to the relief of the structure, you'll start to find things like schools of the cigar minnows, Spanish sardines, which always tend to hang higher in the water column than the cigar minnows. They like to hang close to the wreck for protection, and usually above them you'll find amberjacks, Spanish mackerel, king mackerel and rarely you'll see sharks. A lot of our wrecks hold colonies of sand tiger sharks."

One species Roller has seen with regularity is the African pompano, a species more common in warmer water. They seem to prefer water depths around 120 feet, Roller said.

#### **Reef techniques**

Flounder are a popular calling card of the central coast reefs such as AR 315, 320, 330, 342 and 345.

"People would be amazed by the amount of flounder on them," Roller said, "and that's one reason why we fish them."

Roller likes to anchor upcurrent from a wreck and bounce and drag baits like finger mullet around the bottom rubble. Hang-ups are a penalty, but flounder are the bonus.

When he's not anchoring over a wreck for flounder, Roller tries trolling the wrecks for Spanish, king mackerel, barracuda and other predatory fish.

"For those fish, I like to slow-troll with live bait," Roller said, "and I do a lot of that in the summer."


"What I do – using my experience, GPS and what I learn on my own dives, too – I mark what structures are there so when I troll I can actually only target the structures so I'm not trolling over dead bottom."

"These fish – the instant you get off these wrecks and pieces of structure, all of sudden you are in the middle of nowhere."

And the middle of nowhere usually means no fish.

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