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Local

Posted on Sun, Jun. 11, 2006

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Reef balls provide living monument to ocean-loving deceased

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, N.C. - It was an unusual funeral in just about every way.

Eight people, a dog named Scruffy and a sea turtle named Dare were laid to rest beneath choppy waves, their remains mixed with concrete into "reef balls" ranging in weight from 400 to 4,000 pounds.

The balls, lowered to the ocean floor by a crane, will help create undersea habitat for fish and other marine life.

"I think he would have been proud of his son and daughters to find a special place for him and Scruffy," said Patty Webb, whose husband, William Stover, was laid to rest with their dog. "He loved the ocean and it's a remarkable idea."

Fifty people rode a charter vessel from Sneads Ferry to a spot about two miles off the coast of Topsail Beach last week, where they watched 10 balls put in place to form "Dare's Reef," named in honor of the sea turtle.

Eternal Reefs Inc. of Decatur, Ga., charged \$2,000 to \$5,000 to create each reef ball, marked with a bronze plaque commemorating the person or animal for whom it was cast.

Dare, the Kemps Ridley sea turtle, was a special pet for volunteers of the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Research and Rescue Center in Topsail Beach

The turtle was brought to the center after she was injured by a boat. She recuperated and was ready to be released when Hurricane Floyd struck in September 1999, bringing torrential rain and floods to eastern North Carolina.

Dare spent four days floating in a tank filled with contaminated floodwater. It was found 27 feet in the air in a tree, volunteer Sandy Sly said.

"When she returned she was never the same," Sly said. "We don't know what she went through."

Center directors decided against releasing Dare to the wild. She ultimately died at the center after surgery in March 2005. Some special way to commemorate the animal was in order.

"If you've ever had a favorite a pet that was hurt that you've nursed back or a person, they become a part of you, you have a vested interest in them," said volunteer Nola Jackson. "What a perfect place for a sea creature to go and give back her remains so that other sea creatures can live."

The same sentiment was expressed by other mourners, who hugged, held hands and dropped flowers into the



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water, while a ship's bell chimed for each individual.

Some of the departed had requested this service, while others had never heard of it before they died.

"That's the only thing we regret is that she didn't know about this before she passed away," said Ashley Moore, whose aunt, Anita Justice, was laid to rest. "And she would have been happier than anybody on this boat right now."

Julie Riley had read about Dare and wanted to be part of the turtle's memorial reef. She loved with sea turtles and wanted to improve their environment, her father, Dennis, said.

The Wichita, Kan., woman died Jan. 12 after battling cancer for 18 months.

"I think she would have loved this," Dennis Riley said.

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