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**GREGG HOLSHOUSER OUTDOORS COLUMNIST****Survey says Caudle Reef is No. 1**

Forgive Ron McManus and plenty of other North Myrtle Beach/Little River residents if they break into a chant of "We're No. 1, We're No. 1."

The Jim Caudle Artificial Reef, which the NMB/Little River area so vigorously endorses and promotes, has been tabbed as the No. 1 artificial reef off the South Carolina coast according to a survey conducted by the College of Charleston's School of Business and Economics for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

The Jim Caudle Reef, located about three miles east-southeast of Little River Inlet, was the most visited of the 45 permitted reef sites in the state's Marine Artificial Reef Program in a mail survey of recreational saltwater fishing license holders and dive shops.

"Our community is so proud of the survey, which shows the Jim Caudle Reef is the most visited in the chain of 45 South Carolina [artificial] reefs," said McManus, a member of the North Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. "I can personally tell you that these reef projects have the attention of the entire community, from state senators down to the mayor and local businesses."

The study, conducted in 2006, revealed artificial reefs are indeed popular destinations with recreational anglers and divers in the waters off Horry and Georgetown counties. The second most visited reef was the Paradise Reef, also known as the H.P. Springs Reef or Three-Mile Reef, and the third most visited was the Bruce Rush Reef, also known as the 10-Mile Reef, both located east of Murrells Inlet.

The site of the Caudle Reef was first permitted in 1985 and it originally was composed of a few small barges, steel pyramids and concrete rubble, but it wasn't enhanced for about the next 15 years.

Soon after Jim Caudle, a popular Little River recreational fisherman, passed away in 2000, the Jim Caudle Artificial Reef Foundation was founded. With McManus, a friend of Caudle, and two local saltwater fishing clubs, the Little River Inlet Fishing Club and the Seacoast Anglers Association, involved, the project's momentum and the structure on the reef has virtually snowballed ever since.

"The Caudle site is growing quicker than the other sites," said Bob Martore, Artificial Reef coordinator for S.C. DNR. "We've added material to that reef site for probably the last six to seven years due primarily to the financial support of that group."

While the DNR enhances the reefs in the artificial reef program through funds from the state's recreational saltwater fishing license fees, private funds can also be used to obtain reef material. That's where the NMB/Little River community has stepped in, or rather, stepped up.

"They put a lot of effort into it. They raise money to donate to that reef site," Martore said. "No other reef site has as strong an advocate for it. They've continued to add material to that site and it's grown steadily. Since the site has grown, it has become better for fishing. We've worked with a lot of groups over the years and this is the longest relationship we've had with a [group]. They're a tremendous [group] to work with. Ron himself has worked tremendously hard and it's really paid off."

The Caudle Reef originally had 40,000 cubic feet of reef structure but with the October 2006 addition of 35 demilitarized M113 armored personnel carriers to go with various barges, cement mixers, a tanker trailer and numerous concrete reef balls, the Caudle Reef now boasts about 200,000 cubic feet of structure.

Funds continue to pile up for use in purchasing and placing new material on the reef. Within the last month, the Little River Inlet Fishing Club donated \$2,000 and the Seacoast Anglers Association \$1,700 to the Caudle Reef Foundation.

Martore, who coordinates all structure placed on the program's 45 permitted reef sites, already has plans for the next structure to be added to the Caudle Reef.

"We have a contract out for an 180-foot barge that's in Wilmington [N.C.] being prepared and will be towed to that site anytime now," Martore said.

Martore hopes the latest addition to the reef will be in place by the 9th annual Dixie Chicken Funament, scheduled for May 23-25 out of Harbourgate Marina.

Having the barge in place by that tournament would be appropriate. The one-day event is named for Caudle's boat, the Dixie Chicken, with proceeds benefiting the Jim Caudle Reef Foundation.

Contact GREGG HOLSHOUSER at 843-651-9028 or at [wholshouser@sc.rr.com](mailto:wholshouser@sc.rr.com).

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