



Smith's Reef is one of Providenciales' most popular nearshore patch reefs, with a beauty that is easy for everyone to access.

Reef Rehab

Two popular snorkeling trails get a spring cleaning.

Story & Photos By Richard Green Jr.

After guiding thousands of people around Smith's Reef and Bight Reef snorkel trails for a decade, the educational trail markers circling the popular Providenciales nearshore patch reefs have been treated to a much needed cleaning, thanks to two of the people responsible for the trails' creation.

Marine ecologist Marsha Pardee and artist Pamela Leach, both of Providenciales, donated proceeds from the sale of their children's book *Twas a Sight Before Christmas* to help pay to clean off the marine growth that inevitably overtakes anything underwater for a long time. →



The blue ceramic tiles—13 at Smith’s Reef and 11 at Bight Reef—have done their job well, leading snorkellers along the outskirts of the reefs to minimize the negative impacts possible when venturing directly over the shallow, beautiful formations. Some of the markers warn against touching or breaking corals—even kicking up sand—that can destroy the delicate basis for so much marine life. Other tiles give newcomers and old salts information about the reefs and creatures living there, enriching the wondrous experience.

Both Smith’s and Bight reefs are just a few fin kicks from public beach accesses. So discovering this undersea beauty is easy for everyone, young and old alike, requiring only the ability to swim and to not disturb these treasures.

To get to Smith’s Reef, turn off Lower Bight Road at the Princess Alexandra Land & Sea National Park beach access sign nearest Turtle Cove Marina. Bear left at the fork in the road and follow it to the end, where a narrow gravel road between two walls leads to a small parking area. Out on the beach, walk to your right for about five minutes and look for a small pile of rocks on the beach marking the beginning of the trail. Spotted eagle rays and sea turtles often cruise the reef. The trail takes only about 15 minutes to follow through depths of one to 10 meters. Novice swimmers should pace themselves and pay attention to currents and tides.



The blue ceramic tiles that lead snorkelers along the outskirts of the reef are much easier to read now that they have been cleaned.

Bight Reef, often referred to as White House Reef, is off Lower Bight Road in Grace Bay. Turn at the entrance to the Coral Gardens resort and park in the lot just outside Coral Gardens. A short path leads to the beach, where you’ll see the reef surrounded by swim buoys. Do NOT swim inside the buoy line. This not only protects the reef from you, but you from the reef, which contains lots of yellow fire coral that inflicts severe stinging if touched. A



From left: Marsha Pardee, Barb Young and Pamela Leach, the original creators of the snorkeling reef and explanatory tiles, work on a new project at the Conch World Visitor Centre in Grand Turk.

NEIL BREYTON



shallower reef than Smith's, Bight is only 5 meters deep at most.

The British Foreign Office and more than 30 local businesses and individuals paid for the two trails, and their names appear on the tiles. Marsha Pardee and Gudrun Gaudian were the project leaders, and artists Pamela Leach and Barbara Young designed and created the tile markers.

The trails no longer have funding support, leaving their upkeep to local volunteers who cleaned the tiles periodically in the water. In the latest cleaning, Julie Davis and Brian Cabral volunteered to remove the markers, clean and reinstall them. Marsha and Pam partially paid for their work through Mer Angel, the company they named after the main character in their undersea twist on the famous Christmas story. They are in the process of forming a foundation of the same name to fund further ecological efforts.

The tiles are bolted to small Reef Balls, concrete hollow domes specially designed for reef restoration. The balls, devised by the Reef Ball Development Group, come in various sizes, featuring holes that allow fish to use them as habitats. When corals must be moved to be rescued from coastal development, they are cemented to the environmentally friendly structures as a new home base, jump-starting the natural process. Fish move into the balls immediately, and marine algae flourishes within in the first few months, but corals take many years to grow onto the concrete and eventually cover it.

Reef Balls are being used to create another nearshore reef across from the National Environmental Center near



BRIAN RIGGS

"Layer Cake" Reef Balls are made by Junior Park Warden participants at Beaches Resort.

the intersection of Pratt's Road and Lower Bight Road. The Reef Ball Coalition provided training and marketing, which inspired the Living Classroom Foundation of Baltimore, Maryland, to take on the project for its students, which included at-risk youth and groups from various backgrounds.

Backed by the Department of Environment and Coastal Resources (DECR) and the Ministry of Natural Resources, the program began in June 2000 when students arrived for two marine ecology programs that included the Reef Ball installation at what is now known as the Junior Park Warden Reef Discovery Site. Since then, the project has been carried on annually by local youth through the DECR's Junior Park Warden Program, and more than 60 balls have been put in place.

In 2006 Marsha Pardee and others transplanted the first corals they rescued from Babalua Beach, where developers of the Third Turtle Inn paid to remove corals that would have been destroyed. DECR is currently transplanting a second round of corals to save them from development and dredging in Leeward Going Through.



Salvaged corals from development areas can be "re-planted" onto reef balls for their survival.



Reef Balls are catching on elsewhere in the Turks & Caicos. The all-inclusive family resort Beaches, which donated to the JPW Reef Discovery Site, installed two sites off the beach for their patrons in the summer of 2007, with corals saved from the Babalua Beach development area and other places. The final corals were rescued from Leeward Channel dredge sites and transplanted in January.

The Turks & Caicos Government has declared 2008 the Year of the Coral Reef, acknowledging that development and tourism are taking their toll. That pledge has many residents, businesses and environmentalists hoping for more government money for DECR to monitor and protect the reefs, and for worthwhile projects like the nearshore reefs.

Making reefs more accessible to people is a two-edged sword. Human contact of any kind is detrimental to coral, whether from development, water pollution or water sports like snorkeling. But showing people the incredible beauty of reef systems and the myriad life forms they support can bolster awareness that might help protect and preserve them for future generations. ❁

For more information about Reef Balls, visit their web site at www.reefball.org. For more information about MerAngel, go to www.merangel.net.



BRIAN RIGGS

Junior Park Wardens put a lot of muscle into making the Reef Balls.

Restoration required



KATHY BORSUK

This view of the side of Government House in Salt Cay shows why the restoration is so immediately important.

Government House is falling down . . . and a group of concerned Islanders and residents on Salt Cay want to bring it back to its former glory. Also known as the Old Commissioner's House, the structure was the site of many important and historic Salt Cay events, including the wedding of a present-day schoolteacher. The property also serves as a prime example of Turks Islands architecture from the early 1800s. The house and surrounding property are currently owned through a 99-year lease by the Turks & Caicos National Trust which has taken on the restoration of this extraordinary national asset as one of their ongoing projects. The Turks & Caicos Preservation Foundation Inc. was founded as a Charitable Trust to raise funds to restore Government House and aid in preserving the historic district of Salt Cay. Donations large and small are welcome; a target of \$650,000 has been set to restore the property. For more information and to donate, visit <http://saltcaypreservation.org>.