

# S O U N D I N G S

On their vacation, Todd Barber and his wife Laura rounded up a group of friends, mostly college chums, to create and deploy the first prototype units in West Palm Beach, Florida. Today those early balls are thriving artificial reefs. The group returned home to Atlanta, Georgia, committed to keeping the ball rolling.

The Reef Ball Development Group, Ltd. now has over a thousand Reef Balls in place in the United States, England and Mexico. They work together with local divers, fishing folks and industry to create partnerships for making, deploying and paying for the Reef Balls.

They've been mightily successful to date. In Brevard County, Florida, a group of NAUI instructors partnered up with fishermen affected by a recent net-fishing ban to place a number of units there to promote healthy, ecologically sound reefs. "We're trying to show the state that divers and fishermen can cooperate to do this kind of project," says Todd Barber.

Other partnerships include corporate sponsorship of artificial reef projects, like the one Atlantic Submarines is sponsoring in Cancun, Mexico. At Cancun, which has about 350 of the modules, studies are showing approximately 3-4 times the species diversity and double the amount of fish—measured by weight/biomass—as on other artificial reefs in the same period of time. In fact, reports Todd Barber, "the only thing that grows reefs as fast are limestone boulders—which means that reef balls and natural reefs grow at the same rate."

Barber attributes the species diversity to the fact that reef balls are different sizes, with varying hole

shapes and sizes. "Some little fish prefer the smaller holes in the smaller balls, and the larger ones are good for the bigger species," he maintains.

In addition, reef balls are formulated with different surface structures to attract varying species. In South Carolina and Georgia, the company has mixed granite with the concrete to promote soft coral proliferation. In parts of Florida where the locals are interested in growing hard corals, limestone is mixed with the concrete to achieve the desired results. All the concrete additives are made strong enough to withstand major ocean storms. They are also inert—they don't leech lime into the water. Reef Balls are safe enough for fish to move in immediately.

And the units are easy to deploy, designed close to Jerry Barber's original beach-ball concept, except the beach ball inside is a reusable bladder that is deflated when the floating balls arrive at the site. Although weighing about 3,000 pounds, the largest size of reef balls are nonetheless towable by even a small boat, and deployable with just a few divers.

This kind of simple and inexpensive solution to a serious global problem has garnered Reef Balls Development Group, Ltd. some remarkable attention. The home-grown Georgia company, a coalition of engineers, school teachers, real estate specialists and artists, headed by former Towers Perrin management consultant Todd Barber, has been featured on CNN's *Earth Matters*, and written up in *USA Today* and *Popular Science*. They snagged the International Scuba Educator's Association first ever Environmental Award at the 1994 DEMA show.

Perhaps most importantly, countries are lining up to get these artificial reef starter kits. Jamaica is considering a project that would place 45,000 Reef Balls a year off their shores, with possible sponsorship from Alcoa Aluminum. Kuwait is considering a Reef Ball order, to be built with end-of-day concrete waste and deployed by displaced fishermen, to bolster destroyed coral reefs.

It is not hard to think of dozens of other countries that have coral reefs damaged by dynamite fishing, by storms, by chemical run-off, or by sedimentation, that could use a low-cost, environmentally safe alternative to

building artificial reefs. Reef Balls Development Group, a company whose mission statement charts the group to "restore the world's ocean reefs through the development of new ideas, techniques and devices designed to create aesthetically pleasing, ecologically sound artificial reefs," is poised to succeed. It's a recipe for doing well by doing good—and better yet, it's business that benefits us all.

—Susan Walrous  
To participate in placing Reef Balls, or to sponsor an artificial reef project, contact Reef Balls Development Group, Ltd., 7065 Chappell Circle, Doraville, GA 30360. Phone: (404) 840-8389; fax: (404) 242-9033.