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Want to attract schools? Turn to these students

By ON THE OUTDOORS Candus Thomson

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As the politicians and bureaucrats blather on about fixing what ails the Chesapeake Bay while farms and subdivisions continue to flush away, a group of Anne Arundel County students and teachers are doing their part to make the upper bay more fish- and fisherman-friendly.

The kids, budding scientists who go to Chesapeake Bay Middle School, want to drape a necklace of submerged concrete reef balls around the 300-foot fishing pier at Downs Park in Pasadena.

"All of us want to do this to help the environment. We want the population of fish and oysters to increase," explains Kelly Klovensky, a seventh-grader.

The pier is a wonderful structure from which youngsters, seniors, the handicapped and families can cast their lines. Except for one thing: The structure lacks structure, that is, the kind of underwater features that attract fish and bring them closer to shore.

During youth fishing derbies, volunteers sling chum bags attached to ropes into the bay to entice the fish. Otherwise, pickings would be slim.

"This artificial reef would help people catch more fish," says Mary Arlauskas, another seventh-grader.

Placing chunks of concrete on the bay floor has improved fishing in lots of places, from the Gooses near the Choptank River to Point No Point off the southern tip of St. Mary's County. Subway cars submerged off Ocean City have provided habitat for a variety of species. And perhaps as early as next spring, Maryland, New Jersey and Delaware will pay to have a gutted Navy destroyer sunk off the coast to create the nation's second-largest artificial reef initiative.

The students devised a more modest plan, which will be reviewed Wednesday in Annapolis by the Joint Evaluation Committee, a group that consists of state and federal experts. If they like what they see, the plan will be passed along to the state Board of Public Works for approval. Construction could begin next spring.



(Right here, I should be telling you that I'll report back on their presentation. But a Maryland Department of the Environment official and committee member said the public is not invited to its meetings - never mind that these are public employees meeting in an advisory capacity at a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office. Committee members, I'm told, wouldn't speak freely if the people who pay their salaries could hear what's being said.)

So instead of reporting on the real thing, I watched a dress rehearsal of the presentation, with coaching from members of the Maryland Artificial Reef Initiative.

The project is simple. Nearly 100 reef balls would surround the pier, about 50 yards offshore, creating a field of about two acres. Then, a bed of sea clam shells would be put between the pier and reef balls as a welcome mat for tiny critters that fish love to eat. Reef balls might be tucked under the pier, too. Finally, the students would set oyster spat on the concrete to complete the aquatic community.

The students are receiving help and encouragement from several groups, including the Pasadena Sportfishing Group, the Northern Anne Arundel chapter of Coastal Conservation Association Maryland and the Maryland Saltwater Sportsfishermen's Association. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation is lending its oyster boat to the project.

Under the supervision of teachers Jake Gavin and Catherine Sherry, these kids have raised and released yellow perch and terrapins, and grown and planted bay grasses. But the reef project is their priority, which is why several times every week they meet after school to do more research and polish their presentation. They've spent so much time together, they finish each other's sentences.

"If we have children," Mary begins.

"We'll be able to say we did this," Morgan Buckwalter continues.

"People may say no. But I have high hopes for this project," Mary concludes.

How will they get the adults to say, 'Yes'? "

Eighth-grader Caroline Snead tilts her head and smiles before answering, "We'll put on our cute faces."

Dickens of a challenge

"Great Expectations" is a novel by Charles Dickens.

"Rigorous expectations" are the novel benchmarks set last week by the Environmental Protection Agency for the six states in the Chesapeake Bay watershed to force them to stop runoff and restore water quality.

And if they don't? The EPA, according to its news release, "may impose federal consequences."

Rigorous expectations? Federal consequences? Whatever happened to "shut you down" and "sue your butt"?

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Anyway, the EPA will listen to the public at two stops in Maryland: Dec. 8, from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., at Maryland Department of the Environment, 1800 Washington Blvd., Baltimore; and Dec. 11, from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., at Chesapeake College's Todd Performing Arts Center, 1000 College Circle, Wye Mills.

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