

Bright Idea of Tire Reef Now Simply a Blight

Officials Plan Recovery Off Florida Coast

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FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. -- Now the idea seems daft. But in the spring of 1972, the dumping of a million or so tires offshore here looked like ecological enlightenment.

From the scrap tires, artificial reefs would grow and fish would throng, or so it was thought. A flotilla of more than 100 private boats with volunteers turned out to help. A Goodyear blimp christened the site by dropping a gold-painted tire.

"A potential grouper haven," a county report opined. Artificial reefs made from tires "appear to be the next best thing to recycling."

What happened instead is a vast underwater dump -- a spectacular disaster spawned from good intentions. Today there are no reefs, no fishy throngs, just a lifeless underwater gloom of haphazardly dropped tires stretching across 35 acres of ocean bottom.

It's not just a matter of botched scenery. Because they can roll around, the tires are pounding against natural reefs nearby.

"It's depressing as hell," said Ken Banks, a reef specialist for Broward County, who recently explored the site. "We dove in and swam for what seemed like an hour and never came to the end of it. It just went on and on."

Robin Sherman, a professor at Nova Southeastern University, led a project a few years ago to retrieve some of the tires most directly damaging Fort Lauderdale's natural reefs.

Two months later, she dived in the area again.

"It was completely recovered with tires -- it was even hard to find where we had worked," she said. "That's when I realized we have to clean up the whole thing."

So, after years in which the site was studied and then neglected, officials here are planning to clean up the environmental experiment gone awry.

Coastal America, a partnership of federal agencies, state and local governments and private groups, is trying to organize a cleanup using military salvage teams that would use the tire retrieval as a training exercise. Once the divers pulled the tires up, they would be disposed of by the state at a cost of about \$3 million to \$5 million.

The scale of the project -- some say there are as many as 2 million tires below -- and the number of different specialties required had prevented previous bureaucratic efforts from going forward.

Will Nuckols, project coordinator for Coastal America, called the rolling tires a "coastal coral destruction machine."

"For the past several decades, people have looked at this task and then at each other and said, 'Well I can't do that,' " he said.

With each dive team retrieving about 700 tires a week, officials estimate that the effort would take three years. They plan to begin in 2008.



"It's easy to throw something into the water," said Keith Mille of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "What we're finding is it's extremely expensive to remove something from the water."

The first documented artificial reef in the United States was created off South Carolina in the 1830s. Over time, people have sunk rocks, trees, concrete, ships and barges to create reefs. When successful, they were -- and continue to be -- popular attractions with anglers and divers alike.

Artificial reefs made from scrap tires began in the United States in the late 1950s or early '60s, when the country was facing the monumental task of disposing of millions of automobile tires. At the time, stockpiled tires were creating fire hazards, fostering mosquito breeding and blighting the landscape.

Reefs made from tires seemed like an easy solution.

While coastal communities around the country -- in Texas, California, Florida, North Carolina and elsewhere -- embraced the idea, few projects, if any, were conceived on the grand scale as the one off Fort Lauderdale. Proponents touted it as the largest scrap tire reef in the world.

A 1974 Goodyear pamphlet boasted, "Worn out tires may be the best things that have happened to fishing since Izaak Walton," the author of the classic *The Compleat Angler* .

"There was a lot of local enthusiasm," said Ray McAllister, one of the founders of a local group that pushed for the tire reef and now professor emeritus of ocean engineering at Florida Atlantic University. "We all thought we were doing a good job for the environment."

A tire reef had seemed to work in New England, he said, and organizers figured it would work here.

The project had received a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers and had active support from Broward County, officials said.

While there were initial hopeful reports, it was clear after a decade that the idea wasn't working. Sea creatures didn't grow on the tires. Today, the tires look the same as they did the day they were dropped.

Tires that had been lashed together for stability broke loose, making it easier for them to roll around. With the tires mobile, it was difficult for sea life to make a home there.

Today, most states have restricted or banned tires in artificial reefs, according to a 2004 joint publication of the Gulf and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

In retrospect, McAllister said, "it was a terrible mistake and I hate to admit it. . . . The conventional wisdom, or whatever you want to call it, was not such a bright idea."
