



IMAGE BY DON KINKADE

## The Future of Artificial Reefs By Joe Weatherby



**A**rtificial reefs come in many shapes and sizes and can typically be made to fit any environment or any environmental or fishery goals. Many people have seen great warships or tanks sunk as artificial reefs.

Reef balls have been another very popular substrate (reef material) worldwide. In fact, in Japan, where artificial reefs are used to sustain commercial fisheries, over 300 shapes of substrate are employed.

Several reasons account for the consistent popularity of artificial reefs. The first is that they are

almost foolproof when properly planned. You have to do it VERY badly not to have some good effect. The main reason an artificial reef is unsuccessful is because it was not clean, is composed of some type of bad material, or was sunk in the wrong place.

Perhaps the brightest future role for artificial reefs is the one as a purpose-built tourist attraction. Artificial reefs attract marine life; marine life attracts boaters, recreational fishermen, scuba divers, and snorkelers. The people enjoying these activities tend to spend money in the communities that host artificial reefs. This spending results in increased commerce, tax

artificial reefs. Economically this is a straightforward proposition and one that most people can understand. From a business perspective there is one more benefit to artificial reefs that accrues with the passage of time and is less obvious. A properly prepared artificial reef improves over a period of many years as the marine life congregates, procreates, and coats the substrate with an ever more complex ecosystem. While getting better and continuing to throw off economic and environmental benefits for years, the artificial reef requires no further investment. No maintenance, no staff, no overhead. As a tourism infrastructure

investment this makes a marquee-type artificial reef hard to beat. Artificial reefs are all about the future and added value still-to-come as time goes on.

Propelling an artificial reef idea into a permanent economic driver in a community requires what any infrastructure project would: a great concept, a compelling design, and proper execution. It has just got to be cool to be a big winner. Ships and shopping carts

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**“Veterans,  
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the choice,  
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served  
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reefed”**

are both metal structures and both can make very successful artificial reefs from an environmental perspective. This is because fish cannot tell the difference between them. What typically makes a ship more successful economically is that the tourists who like artificial reefs CAN tell the difference. It can also be argued from an aesthetic perspective that ships have been a part of the underwater landscape since the dawn of civilization. As we are fond of saying in the artificial reefing industry, “They are all sinking; it’s just a question of rate!”

Veterans, when given the choice, almost unanimously prefer to have the ship on which they served cleaned and reefed, rather than seeing her broken for scrap. “Final Duty” as a recreational destination and marine life habitat has a grand appeal to most veterans as opposed to scrapping. In the case of military ships, the taxpayers are also well served. These ships typically have cost tens of millions or even billions of dollars to build and maintain during their lifetime. Recently the government has had to PAY to get them scrapped! Wouldn't the economy and environment be much better served by cleaning at least some of the old military ships and making them into magical underwater ecosystems and job creators in our coastal communities for 100 years or more? This is smart environmental and economic policy for the future.

Artificial reefs in many cases can be much more productive environmentally than natural reefs for a couple of reasons. Artificial reefs can be designed to maximize the existing environmental conditions at a particular site. For example, an artificial reef can be designed to stand taller in the water column than its nearby natural counterparts, thereby getting more light and thus growing marine life more quickly. They can also be placed where natural habitat once thrived but has been destroyed. Artificial reefs have been the focus of intensive study and are far better understood than in the past. In most parts of the world, artificial reefs are being employed proactively as management tools. Scientists have reached agreement that the ocean is in trouble, which poses a real



danger to the future of the biosphere. Artificial reefs can help mitigate this threat.

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