

# OUTDOORS

## Lee County artificial reefs a haven for fish

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Not everyone is fortunate enough to live in the Keys and spend autumn weekends scuba diving and snorkeling over the coral reefs teeming with fish and marine life.

But Lee County divers and anglers are fortunate to live in a county that has 20 artificial reef sites where grouper and other sought-after fish live alongside colorful creatures that delight diving families.

"Artificial" doesn't sound so sexy, but here it makes sense. Unlike the Keys, the sea floor off Southwest Florida is mostly flat and barren, and fish don't flock to sea floors like that.

Fish are, however, attracted to structure - any kind of structure. So the county has created marine environments made from material such as boxcars, concrete culverts, radio towers, old vessels and most recently Sanibel Causeway debris.

Earlier this year, for example, 600 tons of cut-off pilings from the causeway were dumped into the Gulf of Mexico. Another two barge loads - 627,000 pounds - of concrete from the old causeway went into the Gulf last month. Causeway material has been put on the one-fourth square-nautical-mile site in stages starting in 2006 and will continue to be put on this site five miles south of the Sanibel Lighthouse and another one 10

miles off shore.

It all works out perfectly.

Just ask Chris Koepfer, a longtime county employee who has been a steward to the artificial reefs, 18 of which are in the Gulf with two in Charlotte Harbor.

"There is really nothing artificial about an artificial reef," said Koepfer, a natural resources supervisor who takes care of the reefs the way others tend to their children. He keeps an eye on them and makes sure they're managed well.

And he can explain why they work in a way that makes you want to go see one.

"Once the material leaves the barge and begins its residence on the seafloor it becomes something else entirely," he said. "It is no longer a bridge or a culvert or a rock; it becomes something far more productive, a substrate for living organisms. A place for animals and plants to begin their lives, to eat, hide, sleep, grow up, reproduce and die. It becomes a home."

A home with a name. County reefs have colorful names - School Bus, Boxcar, Pace's Place, Doc Kline, Edison, and Power Pole, to name a few. The Causeway West reef recently was renamed the Dean Hicks reef in remembrance of the angler, longtime tackle shop owner and radio personality Dean Hicks, who sadly died of cancer.

Reef sites range from about three miles offshore in 25 to 30 feet of water to 28 miles offshore in 90 feet of water. And they're all easily accessible to boaters who take a trip online to the Lee County Natural Resources site, [www.lee-county.com/naturalresources/artreef.htm](http://www.lee-county.com/naturalresources/artreef.htm)

Pinellas County recently ended its artificial reef program, citing budget cuts. I'd call that shortsighted, considering the environmental benefits such reefs bring to marine life, the recreational benefits for outdoors types, and the practicality of not dumping large debris into landfills and instead "recycling" it.

No plans to cut Lee's program exist, thank goodness.

The water is warm for divers. The fish are biting for anglers. Go check out one of Lee County's artificial reefs this fall. It makes for a good day on the water every time. ■



PHOTO FLORIDA WEEKLY

A Lee County diver eyes a grouper while exploring the ARC artificial reef site off the coast of Sanibel Island.

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### ARTIFICIAL REEFS

Whether you're a diver or an angler, plan well and observe etiquette when visiting Lee County's reefs:

- >>Pick one or two backup sites when you plan the day's trip in case your primary site is taken. If your activity conflicts with that of the person already on site, go to another reef.
- >>Lower your dive flag once you finish your dive.
- >>Approach other users with an open mind. Even though reefs operate on a first-come, first-serve

basis, communicating and sharing make a better day for all users.

- >>Realize all county reef sites have more than one pile of material within their permitted boundaries. If your favorite site is taken, try to find a nearby pile you weren't aware of. Some sites have more than five distinct areas of material.

- >>Check out the Web site: [www.lee-county.com/naturalresources/artreef.htm](http://www.lee-county.com/naturalresources/artreef.htm)

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