

The GOF C Tire-Reef Project

By Richard W. Bowles (GOF C Newsletter, May, 1994)

You want a good, labor-intensive project? Here's what the GOF C did starting with Joe Holton's term as president (1972) and continuing through that of Bill Sloan (1973).

First, they gathered some 3,000 old automobile and truck tires and piled them up in Joe Holton's construction firm area on Depot Avenue. Then the real work took place there.

Club members put the tires together in groups of three or four and, with heavy-duty drills, bored holes around the treads so they wouldn't trap air. They also bored holes through the sides of the tires inside each cluster and joined the clusters together with "rebar," lengths of steel reinforcing bars.

The clusters were stood up vertically. Club member Mike Tilghman worked for a concrete firm, and when the trucks would come back with only partial loads of mix, Mike would send them to Joe Holton's. They poured the bottom margins of the clusters full of concrete, which bonded the rebar and added weight to keep the clusters from rolling.

Over a period of more than one year they badgered the agencies until a permit was finally issued, August 27, 1973. It located the reef, "Approximately 5.5 miles southwest of Seahorse Key and 7.75 miles southwest of Cedar Key. (Note: This is pretty vague, for two such lines don't intersect!)

Club president Bill Sloan persuaded Florida Power to let the club use their loading docks at Crystal River, and from Tenneco got the free use of a 200-foot barge as a transport vehicle. With donated trucks, the club moved the tires from Joe Holton's to the Crystal River FPL docks where a crane loaded the barge. All was ready.

This was December, 1973, and the weather turned sour. Tenneco's barge was stalled at the dock, loaded with the tires, and they needed it for other duties. Tenneco gave the club the choice of unloading the barge or going ahead with the planting of the reef.

On a stormy Saturday the club said, "lets do it." The barge was pulled by a tug, and left the dock with about a dozen GOF C men aboard,

including president-elect Fred Guggenheimer. As Fred remembers it, "Seas were running 3-5 feet, and it was impossible to stop the barge dead in the water to unload the tires. The captain slowed up, and we just pushed the tires off as best we could. This was before we had loran, and there was no way for us to tell whether or not we were in the right place."

An article in the St. Petersburg Times dated December 8th, 1973, covered the event and quotes Fred, "A bunch of diehard fishermen started this. We were determined to build a reef if we had to build our own barge or haul the tires one set at a time by private boat. The project originated one and a half years ago, and it took a full year to get the permits."

The last thing the GOFB barge crew did was push overboard two marker buoys, with flags sticking out of big styrofoam cone-shaped forms, anchored with steel cable and weighted with discarded automobile transmissions. "They weren't out there for a week before somebody cut them away," says Fred.

With today's electronics it's difficult to realize that 20 years ago the flashing-light recorder, which revealed only water depth, was state-of-the-art. Club members couldn't find the new reef. It simply disappeared. The clusters were scattered over such a wide area that they lost their integrity as an artificial reef.

The only proof that the tires are down there came to light in 1985 after completion of the club's second reef project, which was taken over by Dr. Bill Lindberg and Florida Sea Grant. In what Lindberg calls the "sled sweeps," a diver is pulled along on an underwater sled and can rapidly investigate vast areas of sea bottom. One of the divers saw and photographed several of the individual sets of tires, one of which had fish over it.

Lindberg says further that old tires are still an approved material for artificial reefs, and have had limited success in some locations. "Permitting them is difficult," he says, "since getting them ready is cost-prohibitive and labor-intensive."

Yeah - just ask Joe Holton, Bill Sloan, Fred Guggenheimer, Ed Freeman, and the others. Tire reefs are indeed labor-intensive.