

Rebirth of the artificial reef program



A 65-foot, former NY Harbor boat was sunk in 70 feet of water on the Axel Carlson artificial reef 2 miles off Pt. Pleasant. It will provide habitat for sea life and recreational opportunities for fishermen.

A little before 8 a.m. a small group of fishermen resumed a ritual that was nearly lost due to a territorial war.

They formed their boats into a semi-circle two miles off the coast of Point Pleasant Beach to watch a 65-foot former New York Harbor crew boat be purposely sunk on a reef.

It was a perfect morning to do it.

The ocean Tuesday was as smooth as glass and visibility was such that the pastel colors of boardwalk amusements on shore and the tops of inland water towers could be discerned from the distance.

"Once she fills up with water she's going to go down pretty quickly. The only question is, will she go bow up or transom up?" said Ken Warchal, a trustee of the Manasquan River Marlin and Tuna Club, the sport-fishing club that purchased the boat.

The club was sinking the boat in the name of the late Jack Murray, a former club president and champion of marine conservation who served on various fishery management bodies. The goal is to have a site in his honor teeming with fish for anglers to catch.

"We'll probably have a contest to see who can catch the first fish on it," said Warchal, who expects black sea bass, tautog and summer flounder

will inhabit the locale within a year.

Murray's daughter Colleen Smith watched from the *Bang A Rang*, one of the boats in the formation, as it eventually slipped into the ocean with hardly a sound.

"Once the water started to get into the hull, it went down pretty fast," said Dalton Kelly, the 14-year-old grandson of Capt. Butch Kross, who took Kelly and Warchal out on his boat *Pop's Toy* to watch.

Directly under their feet, about 75 feet to the bottom, was the Axel Carlson Reef, a man-made artificial reef on the sea floor and the final resting place of the crew boat once called *Harbor Charlie*.

The reef is a patchwork of sunken barges and tugboats, concrete reef balls and castings, even obsolete Army tanks, spread out over four-square miles. The state Division of Fish and Wildlife said *Harbor Charlie* will last 70 years on the bottom and provide habitat for more than 150 species of marine life.

The Axel Carlson Reef is part of a network of 15 artificial reef sites on the New Jersey coast, two in state waters and 13 in federal waters outside of 3 miles. They total 25 square miles. The division estimates that 18 percent of all fish are caught on the reefs.

"In other words, 2 out of every 11 fish," said Hugh Carberry, the current reef coordinator for the state Bureau of Marine Fisheries, which runs the [artificial reef program](#).

He said other studies have shown that reef habitat provides 800 times more marine life than the sandy sea floor.

"In addition to providing fishing grounds for...anglers, scuba divers utilize (the) reefs to explore underwater ships and to spearfish," said Carberry. "Constructing reefs is probably the most important role of the...Bureau of Marine Fisheries."

The reef program was begun in 1984.

It contributes to the states \$1.4 billion annual recreational fishery, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 2014 figures, its latest.



*The artificial reef network on the New Jersey coast consists of 15 reefs.
(Photo: NJ Dept. of Fish and Wildlife)*

For years recreational fishermen — a broad category used by fishery managers for anglers, spear fishers and for-hire charter and party boats — held small ceremonies like the one Tuesday for a reef sinking.

That all stopped in 2011 at the height of a turf war between commercial and recreational fishermen.

Commercial lobstermen and potters had strangled the reefs with trap lines, obstructing anglers from use of the reefs. On the Sea Girt Reef it was estimated there were 23,000 feet of commercial trap line on it.

"It got to the point where it was like a minefield," said Warchal.

But the commercial fishermen had broken no laws of the reef program. In fact, they argued some reef locations were traditional commercial fishing grounds.

The conflict revolved around the reef funding.

The reefs were funded primarily by the [Sport Fishing Fund](#), made up of private donations from sport fishing clubs and dive groups. The fund was a non-profit created in 1988. Some \$2.5 million had been donated to it.

The Ann E. Clark Foundation, which contributed over a half-million dollars, was by far its biggest donor.

Roiling waters further was the fact that the funding of the state's reef program, including the salaries of the staff that ran it, came from Federal Sportfish Restoration Fund. The money for that fund was collected from excise taxes on the sale of sport fishing tackle.



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By not prohibiting commercial potters from using the reefs, the state violated the guidelines for gear usage on the reefs as mandated by the Sport Fish Restoration Act.

Gear was supposed to be limited to hook and line and spear — not commercial traps and pots where hooks and sinkers and anchors get snagged.

In April 2011 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service moved to withhold funding because of commercial fishing on the reefs. The reef program went on hiatus.

A handful of recreational groups, who did not always see eye to eye, fought to get the commercial potting gear off the reef. It evolved into political squabbling. But the result was an amicable agreement reached last fall and the program was reinstated.

Commercial fishermen were given access to portions of two existing reefs in state waters. The Department of Environmental Protection said a new square-mile reef will be constructed in state waters in an area north of

Barnegat Inlet for use by recreational anglers.

Carberry said the stage is set for the program to make an "epic comeback." It's already beginning.

In June two vessels were sunk on reefs in southern end of the state. And on Tuesday *Harbor Charlie* became the first vessel to be sunk on the Axel Carlson Reef since the program started back up. There are about 10 vessel deployments set for this year.



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There still remains the question of gear restrictions on the reefs in federal waters. Carberry said the DEP is trying to address that.

"The state has petitioned the Mid-Atlantic Marine Fisheries Council for Special Management Zone regulation for reefs in (federal waters)," Carberry said. "Currently, the request is up for review in October."

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