

## Partnership to create largest artificial reef in Texas

Ambitious plan will create habitat for marine life on 381 acres

By Shannon Tompkins

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Photo: Chris Ledford

Five hundred concrete pyramids, specially designed to provide high-quality habitat for marine life, will be the first structures placed in the state's latest artificial reef project, a 381-acre area about six miles off Port O'Connor.

A public/private partnership between the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and a trio of conservation groups plans to sink \$1 million in private donations and 500 specially designed concrete pyramids into the state-controlled water of the Gulf of Mexico in the initial phase of what will be the state's largest, most ambitious artificial reef project.

As much as a half-square-mile of the floor of the Gulf of Mexico about six miles off the Texas coast will begin being transformed into a haven for marine life, recreational anglers and sport divers through the project coordinated by TPWD's artificial reef program and fueled by a \$400,000 donation from Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation and \$300,000 donations from Coastal Conservation Association Texas and Coastal Conservation Association's Building Conservation Trust.

Placement of structures on the reef site could begin as early as later this year, with the placement of the initial 500 concrete pyramids completed before next June.

"It's a win-win deal for all involved," Carter Smith, TPWD executive director, said of the cooperative agreement to create an artificial reef on a 381-acre tract in 60-70 feet of water off Matagorda Island near Port O'Connor on Texas' mid-coast. "The only way we can possibly do projects of this scale is through leveraging public funding with private philanthropy. It's allowing us to do something bigger and better - in this case, create and enhance vitally important and much-needed marine fisheries habitat - than we could do by ourselves with our limited resources."

"It's a unique, important project, and one we're very happy to be a part of," said Sean Stone, executive director of Building Conservation Trust, a national Coastal Conservation Association arm focusing solely on funding coastal habitat preservation, creation and enhancement projects. "It's going to benefit fisheries and anglers. It fits great with our goals."

### ***Crucial for Gulf***

The project, which is being called the "Keeping it Wild" reef in a nod to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation's fundraising initiative to generate more than \$100 million in private donations to help fund Texas conservation priorities, is the latest and largest in Texas' 26-year-old artificial reef program. That artificial reef program was authorized by the 1989 Texas Legislature and officially started a year later with the legislative mandate "to promote, develop, maintain, monitor and enhance the artificial reef potential in state waters and federal waters adjacent to Texas."

Such artificial reefs are crucial to improving and enhancing marine life in the Gulf of Mexico off Texas. Naturally occurring structures - hills, ridges, banks, coral reefs and other bottom irregularities - are rare on the mostly flat and featureless continental shelf off

Texas' coast. But those irregularities and other "hard" structures, including the subsurface structures of oil and gas platforms, provide almost all of the usable habitat for many species of marine life in Gulf waters off Texas. The structures - natural and artificial - provide substrate on which coral, crustaceans such as barnacles and mollusks can affix, all manner of juvenile marine life find refuge and forage and predator species can hunt.

"Biologically, (artificial reefs) they're very important," Smith said. "They provide habitat for an incredible diversity of marine life. They're great places to fish and dive, of course. And that's good. But they are not simply fish aggregators; they are functioning ecosystems."

### ***Use of oil platforms***

Over the past quarter-century, TPWD's artificial reef program has coordinated the building of dozens of artificial reefs off the Texas coast. But the program has been limited by funding. While the program has a legislative mandate, it was left to figure out funding on its own. Over the years, the program has depended greatly on funding tied to its Rig-to-Reefs project, which works in cooperation with owners of decommissioned oil and gas platforms in the Gulf to leave environmentally friendly portions of the platforms in the Gulf as the platforms are disassembled. Much of the program's funding has come from cooperating company's donating the platforms to the agency and sharing the savings of not having to disassemble and move the platforms (savings that can run into millions of dollars) with the artificial reef program. That money is used by TPWD to pursue the state and federal permits required to build an artificial reef, disassembly of the platforms and transportation and placement of other reef materials

Despite the challenges, TPWD's artificial reef program has about 150 decommissioned oil and gas platforms in its program, which has 78 permitted artificial reef sites in the Gulf off Texas shores, said Dale Shively, artificial reef program coordinator for TPWD.

Two more could become a part of the "Keeping it Wild" reef.

"There are two standing platforms, neither of them in use, off Port O'Connor in the 381-acre area permitted for the new reef," Shively said. "We are hoping we can incorporate them into the project."

That project, which will cover the largest area in the program, is part of a series of reefs TPWD hopes to build in state-controlled Gulf water along the coast.

"Our plan is to have large, near-shore artificial reefs - reefs in state water - out of every major port along the coast," Shively said.

### ***Great for anglers***

Such reefs are important for near-shore marine life and, particularly, Texas' offshore anglers. Texas has jurisdiction over fishing regulations in Gulf water inside 9 nautical miles of the coast; water beyond 9 nautical miles falls under federal jurisdiction.

Currently, federal regulations limit recreational anglers fishing from private boats to a nine-day red snapper season; that season began June 1.

Texas has no closed season for recreational harvest of red snapper, meaning anglers inside the nine-mile boundary can target the popular reef fish any day of the year. But because most of Texas' near-shore waters are too shallow to attract red snapper or lack the bottom structure where fish congregate, red snapper fishing opportunities in state water are extremely limited.

Creation of artificial reefs in state waters at depths deep enough to attract red snapper (as well as pelagic sport fish such as king mackerel, cobia, amberjack and others) would be a boon to offshore anglers.

"We can do great things in state waters with projects like this," said Ted Venker of CCA Texas. "The reef project out of Port O'Connor is one of them, and that's why we're supporting it."

The \$1 million in funding, which will officially be announced this week, will be used to pay for the construction of 500 specially designed concrete pyramids to be placed at the reef site, and for the considerable logistics of getting the structures from shore to the site.

The pyramids, 8 feet high with 10-foot bases on their three sides, are built to encourage use by marine life, Shively said.

"They'll have fish using them almost immediately," he said.

### ***Seeking more donations***

The 500 pyramids will be the first of what planners hope will be a steady stream of structures and materials placed over the 381-acre site. But that depends on continued funding needed to accomplish the stunningly expensive logistics involved in storing and transporting materials to the reef site. Cost of a barge and tug to move a single load of material from shore to a reef site can easily exceed \$100,000, Shively said.

To help fund the ongoing costs of the reef project and other conservation projects, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation's "Keeping it Wild" fundraising effort is soliciting private donations and selling lithographs of a series of outdoors-themed paintings by Texas artist Billy Hassell. The second lithograph in the series, a coastal scene with an artificial reef as a background, will be unveiled at the Thursday evening announcement of the "Keeping it Wild" reef funding agreement at Houston's William Reaves/Sarah Foltz Fine Art Gallery.



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