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Snorkel Trails and Reef Balls

by Michael Allard

With St. Lucia's growing water-based tourism, there comes a greater demand for use of the water-based resources. Prominent among the demand for resource use is the demand by snorkellers using reefs. In the aftermath of Lenny, areas used by snorkellers, i.e., near the surface, were affected most. And although, our snorkel areas are still beautiful, the increased demand will place too much pressure on the few areas currently in use.

However, there is a way to alleviate pressure from the natural reef sites while increasing the number of snorkelling areas. This involves the creation of artificial reef systems. The most popular and successful artificial reefs, outside the use of sunken ships, are made from Reef Balls. Reef Balls are patented and specifically design for the type of reef life onewishes to attract. They come in various sizes depending on their purpose.

The Reef Balls are cast around a very durable Polyform inflatable bladder. This allows for the concrete balls (which are actually flat shaped on the bottom for stability) to be towed behind a boat to the site and then gently lowered onto the chosen reef area. Once on the sea floor, the bladders are removed to be used again. The balls are designed so that more than half their weight rests in the bottom within a foot of the sea floor. They are cleverly designed to use the force of the moving seawater, as we experienced with Lenny in large measure, to induce vortexes that reduce the lifting forces thereby keeping them in place.

Also, the Reef Balls can be cast in such a way as to increase their normal weight by double, greatly increasing their stability in high energy zones. These zones close to shore typically are most attractive to snorkellers.

Therefore, Reef Balls could be used to create snorkel trails in areas where we currently have sand and no reef. These trails will attract fish and other marine life of interest to snorkellers. By creating trails in areas currently not used by those involved in water-based tourism, we can alleviate the pressure on the natural resource while building up resources for the future benefit of our tourism economy.

Perhaps working hand in hand with the Department of Fisheries, local

water-based businesses and heritage groups can design a snorkel trail system along the west coast to enhance our wonderful, but limited reef system.

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