

Rubber Reef Retread

If you happen to see several strapping young men and women from the U.S. Army Dive Company jumping from a military landing craft off the coast of Florida this month — and emerging triumphant with rubber tires — don't be alarmed. They're part of an extensive effort to retrieve hundreds of thousands of used tires dumped in the ocean off Fort Lauderdale in the 1970s. No, this isn't an environmental crimes cleanup, it's a case of a good idea gone bad.

Thirty years ago it seemed logical to throw scrap tires into the sea. After all, worn-out tires were becoming an environmental hazard on land, so let's use them to build artificial reefs, give fish a place to live, and generally help the marine environment. Osborne Reef, a mile-and-a-half off Ft. Lauderdale, wasn't the only one. Scrap tires went overboard as rubber reefs elsewhere in Florida and in the waters of New Jersey, the Carolinas, Texas, Virginia, and in Puget Sound; though none on the scale of the Osborne Reef where two million tires went to what was intended to be their final rest.

"Back then, it was believed that the ocean was a big expanse and it didn't matter too much if we disposed of stuff there," says Will Nuckols, Coastal America project coordinator for the Osborne Reef Tire Removal Program, now in its third year. "The initial assumption was that fish would use it as habitat. The problem was the fish didn't like the tires."

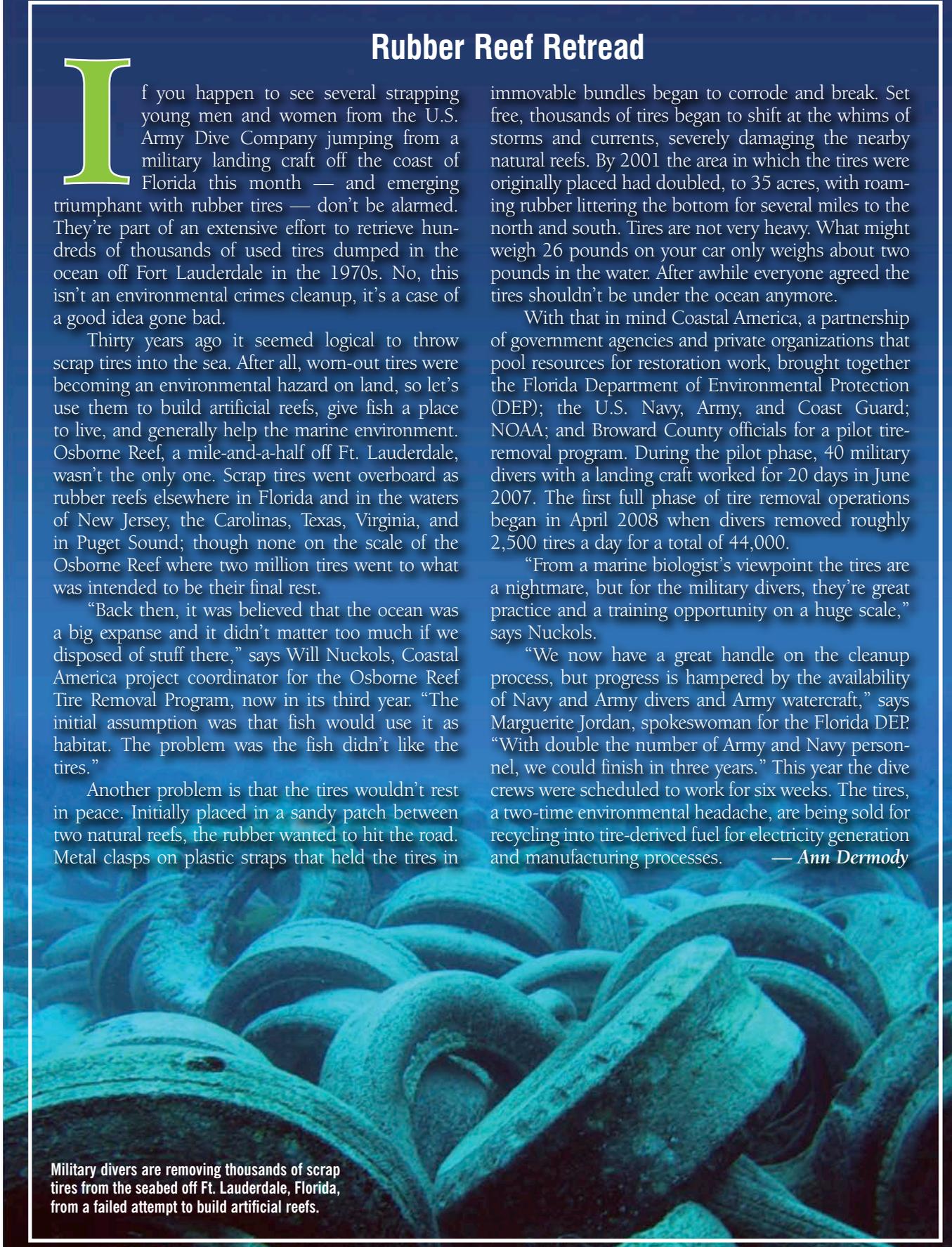
Another problem is that the tires wouldn't rest in peace. Initially placed in a sandy patch between two natural reefs, the rubber wanted to hit the road. Metal clasps on plastic straps that held the tires in

immovable bundles began to corrode and break. Set free, thousands of tires began to shift at the whims of storms and currents, severely damaging the nearby natural reefs. By 2001 the area in which the tires were originally placed had doubled, to 35 acres, with roaming rubber littering the bottom for several miles to the north and south. Tires are not very heavy. What might weigh 26 pounds on your car only weighs about two pounds in the water. After awhile everyone agreed the tires shouldn't be under the ocean anymore.

With that in mind Coastal America, a partnership of government agencies and private organizations that pool resources for restoration work, brought together the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP); the U.S. Navy, Army, and Coast Guard; NOAA; and Broward County officials for a pilot tire-removal program. During the pilot phase, 40 military divers with a landing craft worked for 20 days in June 2007. The first full phase of tire removal operations began in April 2008 when divers removed roughly 2,500 tires a day for a total of 44,000.

"From a marine biologist's viewpoint the tires are a nightmare, but for the military divers, they're great practice and a training opportunity on a huge scale," says Nuckols.

"We now have a great handle on the cleanup process, but progress is hampered by the availability of Navy and Army divers and Army watercraft," says Marguerite Jordan, spokeswoman for the Florida DEP. "With double the number of Army and Navy personnel, we could finish in three years." This year the dive crews were scheduled to work for six weeks. The tires, a two-time environmental headache, are being sold for recycling into tire-derived fuel for electricity generation and manufacturing processes. — Ann Dermody



Military divers are removing thousands of scrap tires from the seabed off Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, from a failed attempt to build artificial reefs.