

When Ships Are Laid to Rest, Reefs Are Born

Idea of Sinking Deteriorating Vessels Stirs Debate

By Barry Eberling

COMPLIMENTS OF DAILY REPUBLIC

FAIRFIELD — Some people, including regional environmental officials, look at the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet and see dozens of decades-old ships polluting the water as the vessels deteriorate.

But former Vacaville resident Dean Rewerts has a positive vision. He sees potential artificial reefs that, once cleaned of toxic materials, could be sunk in the ocean off the California coast.

Such reefs provide habitat for fish. Divers would come because they like to see and explore sunken ships. And that, in turn, creates tourism that boosts the economy for the nearby ports, Rewerts said.

"There is no downside," said Rewerts, who is a member of CSTR (California Ships to Reefs).

That's an issue under debate, with some researchers saying old ships might actually hurt the environment in some cases. But there's no debate that something needs to be done with deteriorating Navy and Coast Guard vessels in Suisun Bay.

Ships from other sources have become artificial reefs. For example, the Canadian destroyer escort Yukon was sunk on purpose off the coast of San Diego in 2000. The 366-foot-long vessel is riddled with holes to make it safer for divers venturing inside.

"It started out as a bare metal ship resting on the bottom in the middle of the sand," Rewerts said. "Now it's absolutely covered with anemones . . . Three kinds of fish are breeding on it."

And divers are exploring it, although several Web sites caution that care and expertise are needed for safety.

"Divers are absolutely crazy to see shipwrecks," Rewerts said. "Even if they don't go inside the wrecks, a diver will dive on an artificial reef."

Rewerts is a diver. He has gone below the surface to see the Yukon and sunken ship reefs off the coast of Mexico.

"It's absolutely great because as you come down in the water, you start to see the outlines of the ship," he said. "As you get close, all of a sudden you see stuff, all these critters all over it. It's absolutely fantastic because you have all these things to look at."

Among the challenges to creating such reefs is getting the ships. And that's where the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet could come in.

Rewerts and his wife, Eleanore, lived in Vacaville from the early 1990s to about five years ago before moving to Wheatland. He was raised in Concord. He knows all about the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet, which has about 80 ships.

CSTR has identified about 30 ships that it would like for reefs, Rewerts said. Among them are 530-foot-long dock landing ships from the 1960s designed to launch amphibious crafts to assault beachheads.

"Bigger vessels are better," Rewerts said. "They're more complex, which is better for fish. The second part is they last longer. A ship-based artificial reef can last for 100 years or longer."

Having surplus federal vessels become reefs has its precedents and procedures.

"We would never donate to the California reefers, for example," U.S. Maritime Administration spokeswoman Shannon Russell said. "We'd only donate to the state of California. They'd have to work with the state. We've donated vessels to Texas."

Meanwhile, the Maritime Administration is embroiled in a dispute with the Bay Conservation and Development Commission over the Suisun Bay fleet. The BCDC cites federal reports indicating that toxic paint flaking off the boats could foul the waters.

The Maritime Administration wants to tow 57 boats away, but the agency has yet to satisfy the BCDC that the deteriorating ships can be moved without causing further pollution.

Lawsuits filed by the BCDC and environmental groups against the Maritime Administration have yet to be resolved. So is the question of whether the ships will ultimately end be turned into scrap or reefs.

"We basically have to wait until the Maritime Administration or Navy decides there's a ship they're willing to let go," Rewerts said.

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