

Community-Led Conservation: Enhancing Fisheries in Destin-Fort Walton Beach, FL
FAF-24-08 Final Report
FishAmerica Foundation

Background

Destin, Florida is a small town nestled in central-western panhandle. It's known as the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village," a term keyed by then-Governor LeRoy Collins in the mid-1950s. Although the once-robust commercial fishery which was the foundation of Destin's cultural heritage has given way to recreational fisheries, Destin continues to remain the luckiest fishing village and is home of the largest charter fishing fleet in the nation.

The cultural heritage of fishing is alive through the Destin History and Fishing Museum – one of very few fishing-related museums throughout the county – and the future of fishing remains alive through Destin High School's state-approved fishing curriculum. This program's goal is to foster a passion for fishing and to prepare students to be successful in fishing-related careers that could range from conservation to entrepreneurship. It provides an opportunity for students to gain knowledge of local/state fishing regulations and conservation, and to develop hand-on skills ranging from knot tying, weather, CPR/First Aid, and navigation, to apprenticeships that prepare the student for their U.S. Coast Guard Merchant Mariner (Captain's) License.

Head down to down the Destin Harbor early evening and you can see dozens of boats returning to the docks with an abundance of reef fish – creating a robust eco-tourism industry for visitors and locals. To support this, Okaloosa County operates the state of Florida's most active artificial reef program, which is run by a team of marine biologists within the county's Coastal Resources division. Among other priorities, one focus of the Coastal Resources Team is promoting fisheries access, restoring, enhancing, or creating quality habitat for fish and other marine life, and supporting fisheries management and research in the Destin-Fort Walton Beach area.

Okaloosa County has created more than 565 public artificial reefs since the mid-1970s, with more than 50% of them being created in the last five years alone. These sites range from secondary-use concrete such as concrete culverts, bridge material, or military practice targets, to small (65ft.) and large (440ft.) decommissioned vessels. One of the most deployed artificial reef habitats in the northern Gulf of Mexico in recent years are prefabricated concrete modules. These structures are designed to mimic characteristics of natural reef habitat, supporting encrusting organisms while providing forage and refuge habitat. The vertical relief also provides an abundance of habitat for reef-dependent fish.

In early 2025, Okaloosa County received a \$10,000 grant from the FishAmerica Foundation and the Brunswick Foundation (FAF-24-08) to enhance nearshore reef fish habitat, support health fisheries, improve recreational access and fishing and diving opportunities, and educate the public about marine stewardship by fostering public/private relationships. The goal was to work with members of the community, including Destin High School and the Emerald Coast Reef Association, a local non-profit reef, to leverage this grant funding and increase the number of reefs that could be deployed.

Implementation

The County originally applied for \$25,000 with a \$25,000 cash match allocation. The County was awarded \$10,000, with no match requirement, through this grant opportunity. However, due to the cost to manufacture and deploy concrete modules, as well as challenges associated with piggy-backing other module deployment opportunities in the area, the County had to reach out to other funding entities to offset minimum mobilization costs. An additional \$55,000 was raised through match, fundraising, and donations. In addition, Walter Marine, the contractor selected to build and deploy these reefs, provided a generous discount to support the community-driven effort.

Source	Funding Type	Amount
Okaloosa County	In-kind match	\$23,500
Destin High School	Fundraiser/Donation	\$17,000
FishAmerica Foundation	Grant	\$10,000
Coastal Conservation Association of Florida	Donation	\$10,000
Gulf Coast Lionfish Tournaments	Donation	\$2,500
Emerald Coast Reef Association	Donation	\$2,000
Total Project Funding:		\$65,000

Hand-on activities and learning opportunities for students

As part of this project, County staff were able to work with Destin High School to provide an in-person presentation to students as part of their “Commercial Fishing II” course. This presentation focused on the history of artificial reefs – from mindlessly dumping vehicles and other non-compatible materials offshore to the development of more sustainable and regulated practices – and Destin-Fort Walton Beach’s artificial reef program.

To raise additional funds to support this community-led effort, students hosted a community fundraiser at a local tackle store on April 26, 2025. Prior to this event, a local media outlet promoted the fundraiser (Appendix A), which led to more than



50 social media shares, and countless re-shares throughout the local fishing community – including groups with membership levels ranging in from 4.7k to 23.8k people.

As part of the fundraiser, students sold rod, tackle, boating items, and general sports and outdoors equipment that were donated. Additionally, they held a 50/50 drawing, received cash donations directly from members of the community, and hosted a “purchase a reef named after the donor” drive. In total, this event along with other support from the school and donors, netted \$17,000 that went towards reef deployment.



Students and donors had an opportunity to visit Walter Marine’s construction facility in Orange Beach, Alabama. They were directly involved with the construction reefs that they were deploying as part of this project. Reefs were dedicated to an individual and/or family by partially burying a name plate and mementos into the wet concrete. Some reefs were memorials and others as dedication to the person(s) community support.

A total of 25 Florida Artificial Reef (FLAR) Tetrahedrons were deployed on September 12, 2025. Several local charter captains provided transport to the deployment location, at no cost, to allow the students and donors to observe the deployment. In total, six different vessels were on-site with varying number of passengers. Following the deployment, Coastal Resources staff conducted dive operations to verify the location of the reefs and take pictures. A variety of fish had already begun exploring the new reefs by the time divers got into the water because of the proximity to reefs deployed in 2024 through a similar Destin High School educational opportunity.

All necessary post-deployment permit information, including the exact coordinate of each reef, was provided to state and federal permitting agencies. Coordinates for each individual reef are listed in Table 1 and illustrated in the attached map. Additionally, coordinates for all of Okaloosa County’s public artificial reefs are available for free download or interactive-map viewing at destinfb.com/explore/eco-tourism/artificial-reefs.

Timeline of Events

- **January 7, 2025:** FAF-24-08 contract fully executed
- **March 3, 2025:** Destin High School Fishing class presentation by Mike Norberg.
 - “Okaloosa County Natural Resources: Artificial Reef Program”
 - Provided an overview on the history of artificial reef creation, lessons learned and development of state/federally established best management practices, and history and future of Okaloosa County’s artificial reef program
- **April 22, 2025:** Get The Coast news article: “Destin High School aims to deploy 15 new artificial reefs with upcoming fundraiser”
 - Get the Coast Social Media (106 Likes; 53 Shares)
 - Noteworthy social media shares: Destin High School (50 Likes, 26 Shares), Okaloosa Island Pier (46 Likes, 9 Shares), Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources (46 Likes, 2 Shares), Destin Offshore Fishing (34 Likes)
- **April 26, 2025:** Destin High School Artificial Reef Fundraiser
 - Several donation options including digital donation, tackle donations/sales, raffles, “purchase a reef,” captain memorial reef earmark
- **September 2, 2025:** Destin High School & Donor Reef Building
 - Hands-on reef building at Walter Marine in Orange Beach, Alabama
- **September 9, 2025:** Artificial Reef Deployment
 - 25 reefs deployed at the “Destin High School Reef 2025”
 - Coastal Resources staff conducted post-deployment dive operations to gather underwater content and verify positions of each reef.

Photos



Destin High School students getting a hands-on experience building artificial reefs.



Destin High School students getting a hands-on experience building artificial reefs.



Destin High School students getting a hands-on experience building artificial reefs.



Destin High School students get a tour aboard the Maranatha II – reef deployment vessel.



Destin High School students climbing on a Walter Marine “Super Pyramid” during their reef building fieldtrip.



Maranatha II and spectators on-site for artificial reef deployment.



Maranatha II deploys artificial reefs built by students and donors as part of Okaloosa County's FishAmerica Foundation & Brunswick Foundation grant opportunity.



Destin High School students and community donors on-site for deployment of reefs.

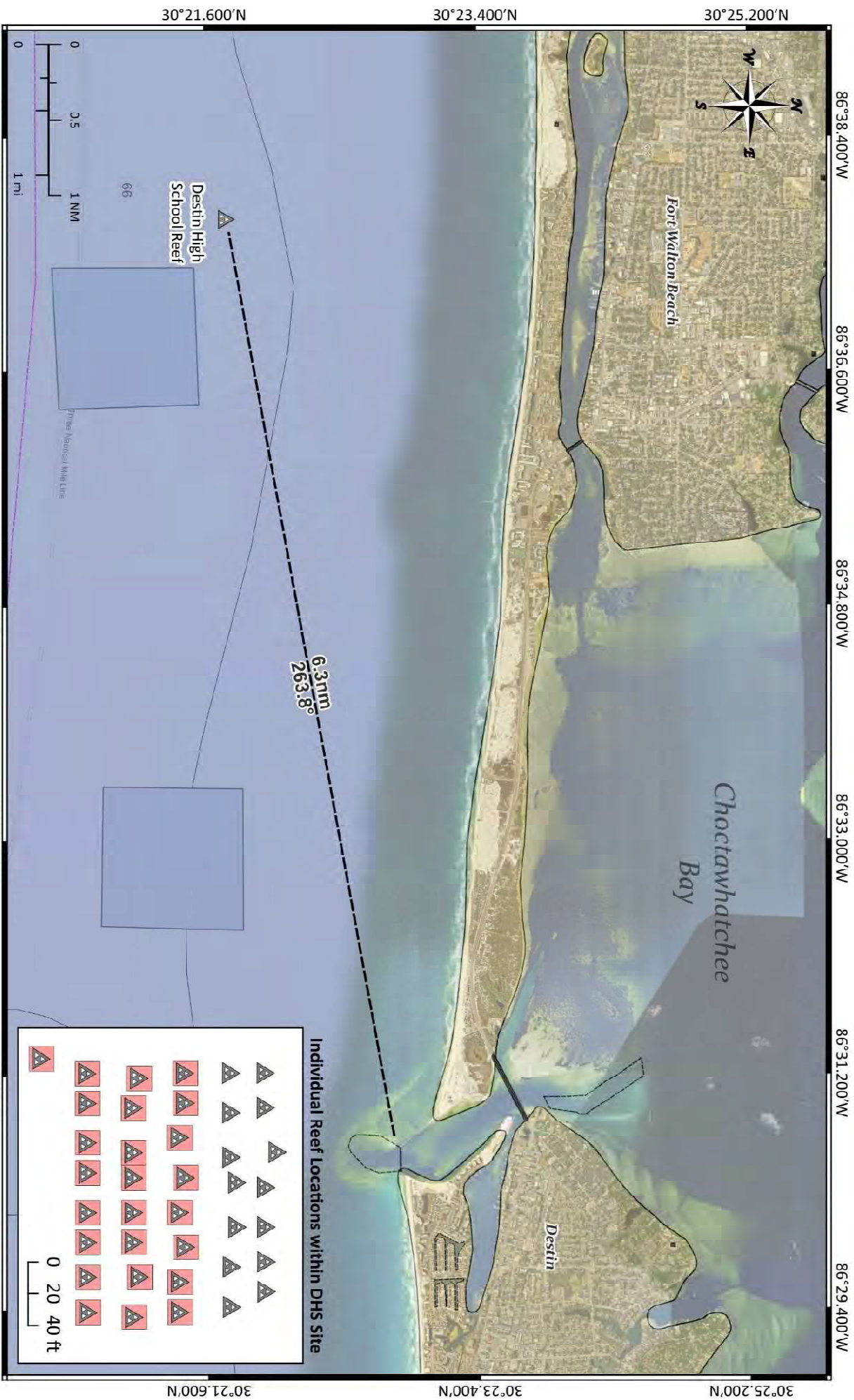


Underwater photo of reefs deployed by Destin High School students and donors.



Underwater photo of reefs deployed by Destin High School students and donors.

Map and Coordinates



2025 Destin High School Reef Deployment

Funding provided by FishAmerica Foundation & Brunswick Foundation

Okaloosa County Natural Resources
Source: NOAA ENC Maritime Chart Service

Table 1. Post-deployment coordinates and reef information for reefs deployed as part of Okaloosa County's FishAmerica Foundation grant.

DeployID	Deploy_Date	Description	Tonnage	Depth	Relief	Name	Longitude DD	Latitude DD
OK0584-01	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T1)	-86.62944	30.36207
OK0584-02	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T2)	-86.62953	30.36199
OK0584-03	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T3)	-86.62936	30.36207
OK0584-04	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T4) - Tommy Mikel	-86.62950	30.36207
OK0584-05	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T5) - Bud Miller	-86.62949	30.36216
OK0584-06	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T6) - Dick Boyles	-86.62943	30.36215
OK0584-07	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T7) - Aiden Fournier	-86.62934	30.36215
OK0584-08	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T8) - Salty Schnauzer	-86.62929	30.36215
OK0584-09	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T9) - Brandon Sheley	-86.62922	30.36215
OK0584-10	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T10) - Bill & Sheri McDonald	-86.62916	30.36215
OK0584-11	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T11) - Karl Trammell	-86.62909	30.36216
OK0584-12	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T12) - William Frank Davis	-86.62901	30.36215
OK0584-13	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T13) - Butch Golden	-86.62902	30.36223
OK0584-14	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T14) - Shannon Grassley	-86.62908	30.36223
OK0584-15	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T15) - Charles Johnson	-86.62915	30.36224
OK0584-16	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T16) - Anglers Grill	-86.62922	30.36223
OK0584-17	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T17) - Island Pier	-86.62929	30.36224
OK0584-18	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T18) - Anna & Natalia	-86.62937	30.36223
OK0584-19	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T19) - Barcus Family	-86.62944	30.36224
OK0584-20	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T20) - Kennedy Goodsell	-86.62950	30.36224
OK0584-21	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T21)	-86.62930	30.36207
OK0584-22	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T22)	-86.62922	30.36207
OK0584-23	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T23)	-86.62916	30.36207
OK0584-24	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T24)	-86.62909	30.36207
OK0584-25	20250912	1 Walter Tetrahedron (FLAR), Destin High School Reef 2025	3	66	8	DHS Reef 2025 (T25)	-86.62902	30.36207

Appendix A.

Media and Community Outreach



(<https://www.getthecoast.com>).



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Destin High School aims to deploy 15 new artificial reefs with upcoming fundraiser

Destin High School's Fishing Program will host its annual artificial reef fundraiser on April 26, building on the success of last year's efforts that expanded marine habitat and created memorial tributes in Gulf waters.

April 22, 2025 (<https://www.getthecoast.com/2025/04/22/>) 2:38 PM
ASHLEY WARD (<https://www.getthecoast.com/author/ashleygetthecoast-com/>)

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Alex Fogg

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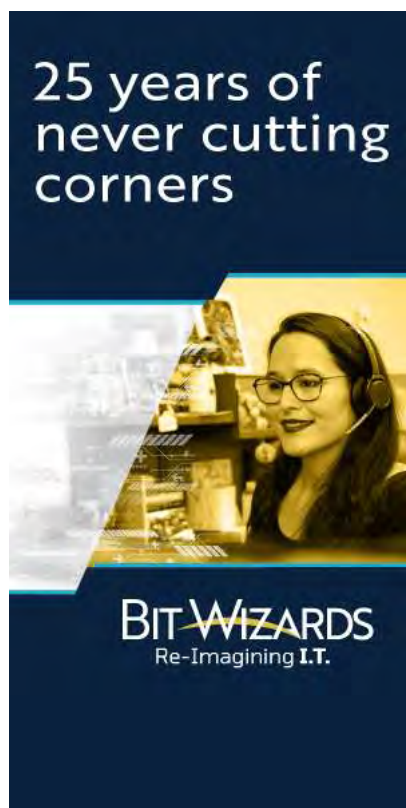
(<https://bitwizards.com/>).

Destin High School's Fishing Program will host its annual artificial reef fundraiser on April 26, building on the success of last year's efforts that expanded marine habitat and created memorial tributes in Gulf waters.

- **The event** will run from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Half Hitch Tackle, located at 621 Harbor Blvd. in Destin, with a goal of building 15 reefs this year to add to the "Destin High



School Reef."



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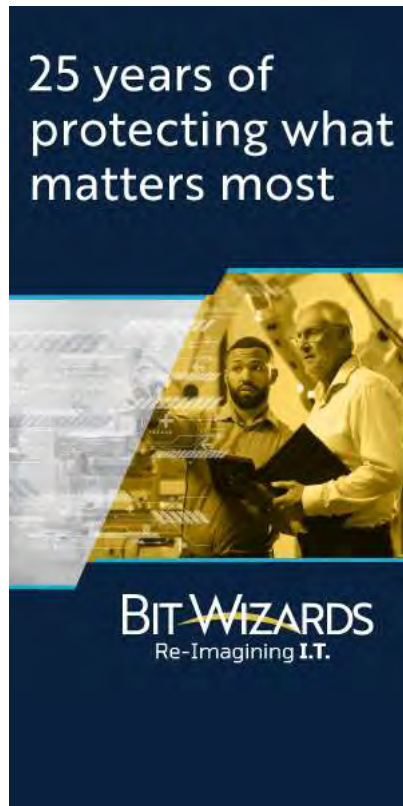
Last August, the school's fishing program deployed 14 artificial reefs in an area now known as Destin High School Reef, located in about 65 feet of water just a couple of miles off the beach. Each reef stood 8 feet tall with a 9-foot triangular base and weighed 5,500 pounds, providing new habitat in waters near the Okaloosa Island Pier.

The project included memorial reefs honoring community members including Tucker Reese, a 9-year-old local baseball player who passed away following an ATV accident, and Jonathan Hughes, described as a "Shark Dad" with a child attending Destin High.

- **Contribution options include** donating lightly-used fishing tackle for sale, participating in a 50/50 drawing, supporting memorial reefs for local captains or family members, or purchasing a reef named after the donor's choice.

Okaloosa County's Natural Resources Team received a \$10,000 grant to help supplement the school's fundraising efforts through the FishAmerica Foundation and Brunswick Foundation. The Emerald Coast Reef Association is also contributing funds towards this effort.





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Okaloosa County's artificial reef program is one of the most active in the nation, with more than 564 reef sites deployed off Destin-Fort Walton Beach since 1976. Over 300 of these have been placed since 2019.



Those interested in donating can scan a QR code at the event, or text "dhsreef" to 41444.

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