

# 1000 new reefs off Steinhatchee aimed at boosting grouper population

*Included in the plan are concentrated fishing reefs west of Keaton Beach and scuba diving trails to the south*

by Justin Sapp

Do the gulf waters out of Steinhatchee need a new artificial reef? How about a thousand!

The classic debate over artificial reefs is whether reefs increase fish numbers or just concentrate fish at published GPS coordinates. For University of Florida Professor Bill Lindberg, that question is old news. Based on Lindberg's research and a plan hatched by Taylor County native Mark Dickert, the University of Florida and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will develop nearly 1,000 artificial reefs over a 100 square-mile area out from the Steinhatchee River. This project is called the Steinhatchee Fisheries Management Area (FMA).

The idea for the project came to Dickert after he saw the positive impact of placing artificial reefs out from the mouth of the Suwannee River in the early 1990s. He contacted some researchers at the University of Fla. and after years of permitting setbacks and funding delays, the project finally has the green light.

The Steinhatchee FMA will use three-foot pre-fabricated reef cubes developed by Lindberg that will be spread out along the sandy Gulf bottom in a way that is proven to boost fish populations. Due to their scattered distribution, these are called "patch" reefs. The area is actually a big triangle. The base extends 10 miles to the north and 10 miles to the south of the mouth of the Steinhatchee River and starts in about 18-20 feet of water.

"It works out great because by starting only about 10 miles out to sea, the average person in a smaller boat can start to get out and enjoy the offshore fun," Dickert said.

The Steinhatchee FMA is a federally designated area and will be the first of its kind in the nation.

Included in the plan are concentrated fishing reefs west of Keaton Beach and scuba diving trails in the south. One-hundred twenty artificial "reef balls" will be placed along the dive trails to attract more underwater diversity. According to Dickert, the diving trails will be an ideal location for checkout dives.

"We're even working to get some large statues and underwater educational materials placed along the trail," he says. "It should be a great place to visit and to educate." In many ways, the Steinhatchee FMA is like a marine protected area, except that the area will NOT be closed to public fishing. In fact, fishing and other recreational use is encouraged.

The whole project revolves around one of our favorite offshore residents, the gag grouper. The life cycle of gag grouper spans the Gulf of Mexico's continental shelf. After spawning from January through March far offshore, the baby gag travel on currents to inshore waters to spend their early life among the oyster bars and fertile grass flats of Northwest Florida. By late fall, the young grouper are nearly one foot long and are ready to move out to deeper water. Eventually, the whole cycle begins again far out to sea.

Scientists suspect that a big challenge in the life of gag grouper is the long move from the sheltered nursery of inshore waters to the offshore spawning grounds. The water in between is rela-

tively flat and barren and does not present much in the way of protection for these valuable, undersized fish. That's where the Steinhatchee FMA comes in.

The Steinhatchee Fisheries Management Area (FMA) should be completed in about four years and will help the fish grow faster and increase their chances of reproducing. All along the sandy Gulf bottom, a thousand reef cubes will be strategically spread out to maximize the protection for juveniles as they travel out to deeper water and also provide more habitat for the baitfish that grouper depend on to survive. All gag under 32 inches are female, so it is critical that they are able to grow safely to spawning size, with some developing later into males.

The first phase of this project is currently under way. Lindberg and crew are placing reefs in 70-80 feet of water in an area known as the "Middle Grounds." By monitoring reefs near the gag grouper's spawning area, they will be able to observe the increases in fish numbers and size. This is the part of the project

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**BRANDIE FERGUSON** hauled in this fine 24-pound amberjack while fishing aboard "The Blue Dolphin" out of Keaton Beach.



**PERSONAL-BEST TROUT** - Tony Walters of Leesburg, Ga. was fishing from the Econfina River when he got a strike from this big ol' speckled trout. Tony said the holly speck was his "personal best."