

It's What Jeff Would Have Done

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Water LIFE Editor

Capt. Jeff Steele was affectionately known as Capt. Clam. He was a Charlotte County fisherman, diver, clammer, shrimper and all around waterman. I had the privilege to have known Jeff before his untimely death two years ago. But Jim Joseph and his wife Julie, owners of FantaSea Scuba in Port Charlotte, knew him much better. They dived together a lot. "And we drank a lot of Margaritas together with Jeff and his wife Barbara," Jim told me last month, smiling warmly.

"When I die, my plan is to have them put me in a wooden boat, set it ablaze and send me off. A Nordic send off," Joseph told me adding that Jeff had told him if he dies first "just put my ashes in a 5-gallon bucket mixed with Sakeret and sink it in the Gulf."

In case you don't know the whole



Charlotte County reef story, Jim Joseph, Jeff Steele, Jerry Trembly and (then) Charlotte County Sea Grant Agent Rich Novak were some of the first to work together to build artificial reefs in our area. It was a loose association of guys with the same interest of improving the fish holding structure offshore. I was there as a friend and photographer.

When Jerry Trembly died, Novak had a reef named for him. It was the first part of the old I-75 bridge. Novak had overseen its construction. The underwater structure of the huge stacked concrete beams is very impressive and it holds a lot of fish. Then when Novak died while tuna fishing in 2004, the rest of us got together to have an artificial reef named for him.

Then two years ago Jeff disappeared off the back of a fishing boat in Alaska and his friends commissioned the Jeff Steele Reef for him.

Reef materials have been going down on the Jeff Steele Reef for almost two years now, the first being the old Kelly Brother's 110-foot barge, sunk a year ago and the most recent, the concrete beams from the old Coral Creek bridge. In August a monument was placed there by Jeff's friends.

Many of the county's artificial



reefs have concrete culverts as part of their structure. In the good times there was money and manpower to pour concrete bases that big culverts were laid in. The result provided excellent structure for fish and the flat base kept it from sinking into the bottom. Fittingly, the Jeff Steele Memorial (GPS: 26-55-935, 82-35-809, the numbers are not yet published) is a small section of culvert pipe with a concrete base and a bronze plaque. "Fish On" is inlaid in mosaic tile on the top. Jeff's ashes are mixed with the concrete.

Jeff had an old boat, a Sheffield, it was a mullet boat, a utility vessel. It sat at Eldred's Marina in Placida since

his death and was now almost submerged. "We pumped it out, put the monument in the boat, and towed it out to the reef site," Joseph said. "We had a pump going all the time to keep it afloat."

"We put the monument in the water with two lift bags and I rode it all the way to the bottom," Joseph said. When they got it down they moved it up under the bow section of the barge, on the southeast side where it will be sheltered from a northwest blow. They came up and had Margaritas. "We poured one in the water for Jeff and we drank the rest on the way back home. Jeff would have done the same for any of us."

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