

Off-shore marine park proposed

Keys water quality may be obstacle

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KEY WEST — Local environmentalists are proposing an underwater marine park in near-shore waters off Key West, a concept they say could eventually lure leery Conchs and tourists back to sewage-contaminated beaches and provide a unique and convenient snorkeling experience.

The concept, which was to be presented by Reef Relief organizers at Tuesday night's Key West City Commission meeting, calls for a swim lane on the south side of Key West from the shoreline out to 600 feet. City officials planned to table the proposal until more information is obtained.

While the proposal may be a tough sell at present given the island's water-quality troubles, Reef Relief workers said water enthusiasts stand to benefit from the park significantly when, or if, precautionary health advisories are permanently lifted.

This week, the Monroe County Health Department once again posted health warnings at several Key West beaches after the locations tested positive for fecal-based bacteria. Raw sewage has been migrating into Keys canals and near-shore waters for years because of outdated and leaking cesspools and septic tanks. The leakage from these wastewater treatment systems has prompted state officials to mandate that the county complete an upgrade of virtually all sewage systems in the Keys by 2010.

The proposed swim park, from the White Street Pier westward to a point near the foot of Duval Street, encompasses an area rich in marine life and vegetation, said Reef Relief founder Craig Quirolo, who is spearheading the venture. Not only is the shallow blue water there teeming with juvenile lobsters and tropical fish, but swaying sea fans, sponges and small coral heads typically only found at off-shore coral reef sites.

Quirolo claims the area also has a unique historical feature: two old Western Union cables that run from Key West to Havana. "There's growth all over them," Quirolo said. "We think it makes some great scenery and adds a little history to the area. . . . There's not many places people can go where they snorkel a few hundred feet off the beach and see stuff like that."

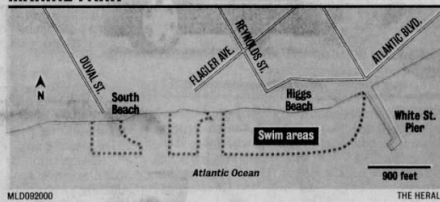
The proposed zone, which would be marked by demarcation buoys,



CRAIG QUIROLO/REEF RELIEF

UNDERWATER ATTRACTION: A zone rich in marine life and vegetation would be a lure for a park in near-shore waters off Key West.

MARINE PARK



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would be off-limits to motorized water vessels such as personal watercrafts. Boats and jet skis wouldn't be banned altogether, however. Two entry lanes would be established for access to the shore in addition to the existing channel, which marks the entrance to the docks of the Wyndham Casa Marina Resort and Beach House.

Quirolo insisted the buoys and entry lanes would be established in cooperation with commercial boat companies and property owners in the area.

Should city officials sign off on the project, Reef Relief officials plan to pursue state support to declare the entire zone a "no-take" area, making it off limits to the harvesting of coral and marine life. Quirolo also is consid-

ering installing reef balls throughout the swim zone to create fish habitats and provide hard surfaces on which coral can grow. Reef balls have been installed at many snorkel sites in the Keys, most recently off Key Largo, and provide protection for myriad marine species.

Virginia Panico, executive director for the Key West Chamber of Commerce, said she still has more to learn about the project but likes what she's heard so far.

"From what I'm told, [the swim zone] sounds like something many people, particularly families, could appreciate," Panico said. "You wouldn't need a boat to get there and it's accessible right from shore. I'm sure it would attract lots of different groups."