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Cara Armbrust, left, from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and Russ Moldenhauer, right, a volunteer, work to build an oyster reef along the shoreline in Bayou Grande.

LIVING REEF COMES TO BAYOU GRANDE

Project aims to restore shoreline

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What started off as a class project for Walter Lurton in 2011 has turned into a major living reef installation along more than 1,200 square feet of Bayou Grande shoreline.

Keep Pensacola Beautiful, The Florida Department of Environmental Pro-

tection, Escambia County Marine Resources Division and seven waterfront property owners will partner to install 39 recycled oyster reefs between Gordon and Wayne Avenue along the Bayou Grande shoreline, based on plans that Lurton created while enrolled in the Florida Master Naturalist program.

Lurton, 67, was required to create an interpretation, or a final project, for the naturalist program.

"We did field trips and looked a lot of different things, and one of the things we focused on was Project Green-Shores," Lurton said.

Project Greenshores is large habitat restoration project located along the downtown shoreline of Pensacola Bay.

"I did a CAD drawing of all of this (Bayou Grande shoreline) and wrote some verbiage about why all this should be done, and I presented it to the class," he said.

Beth Fugate, the Northwest Florida Aquatic Preserves Manager for the Florida Coastal Office of the DEP, was able to work with Lurton after seeing his presentation, the waterfront

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The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, volunteers and property owners help to build an oyster reef. Escambia County, Keep Pensacola Beautiful, volunteers and property owners in the area teamed up to install the reef system.

Reef

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property owners who live around the bayou, and Escambia County, in order to get the proper permit and authorization needed to install the reefs.

Escambia County owns the right of way throughout the stretch of property along the bayou, so their participation was vital to move the process forward.

Filing and acquiring the correct permits has taken nearly six years.

Fugate and her team, along with Keep Pensacola Beautiful's Assistant Director Jill Cleaver and more than 20 volunteers successfully built four and half living reefs Thursday morning.

"I think this will be a great avenue to not only protect what we have, but to put more of the habitat back in there," Fugate said. "We want to see more birds, fish, oysters and help bring back the health of the bayou."

Keep Pensacola Beautiful received a 5 Star and Urban Grant from Southern Company for \$29,888, and has been collecting oyster shells for the project since January from five local restaurants — Peg Leg Pete's, Shaggy's, Red Fish Blue Fish, Shux and the Grand Marlin.

Each reef consists of 200 bags of oyster shells, with each bag weighing 20 pounds, for a total of 171 tons of shell throughout the 39 reefs. After the oysters are collected, they are dried for three to four months in a stor-

age site on the Pensacola State College campus.

"Some of the oysters have dirt and debris and silt on them, so they weather in the storage site and the rain, animals, and invertebrates eat whatever remaining stuff is left on them," Fugate said.

In addition to the recycled reefs, more than 11,300 square feet of native salt-tolerant vegetation will also accompany the reefs.

"We'll be putting in smooth cord grass, black needle grass, salt metal cord grass, and salt bush plants," Cleaver added.

The oyster reefs help protect the grasses, and the both create habitats for complimentary ecosystems, explained Zachary Schang, environmental specialist with the Northwest Florida Aquatic Preserves for the DEP.

"What this project does is add stabilization to the shoreline," Schang said. "And by stabilizing the shoreline using these more natural structures, we're allowing for tidal flow, allowing for the natural function of the shoreline to occur, and just limiting the amount of erosion that can take place."

The grasses and the oyster reefs work together to provide a significant amount of nutrient uptake, which pulls sediments and excess nutrients out of the water, helping to improve the water quality.

Keep Pensacola Beautiful has previously restored 22 oyster reefs in Bayou Texar along the publicly accessible Bayview Park, and 44 reefs along private home waterfront properties on Bayou Texar.

"I think anything we can do to prevent the erosion will benefit this bayou as a whole," Cleaver said.