

Point Pleasant man hopes his massive horseshoe crab sculpture can become state's latest artificial reef

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[Andrew Mills](#)/The Star-Ledger Christopher Wojcik poses with the 25,000-pound concrete sculpture of a horseshoe crab he has built. Wojcik hopes his creation may become part of New Jersey's artificial reef program.

[Chris Wojcik](#)'s "dream" sits idly in a Brielle marina. The precious cargo perched atop a 50-foot-long barge isn't a shiny white yacht or cabin cruiser — it's a 48-foot-long, 25,000-pound concrete horseshoe crab. The sculpture dwarfs the vessels, lurking like some sea monster in a Japanese horror film. And the fact that it's made out of concrete and is completely unseaworthy, is precisely what makes it so precious.

Wojcik plans to sink his marine art off the New Jersey coast near Mantoloking to become the latest addition to the state's network of artificial reefs.

"There's very few underwater sculptures anywhere in the world," said Wojcik of Point Pleasant. "I firmly believe in the artificial reef program and the benefits to recreational fishing and marine life. It was an engineering challenge and an art challenge. It just didn't seem that there was a downside.

"I'm an artist, and I'm also a marine biologist and a scuba instructor," said Wojcik, who builds live animal exhibits for zoos and aquariums. "So it's kind of in my wheelhouse."

The project is being paid through donations or out of Wojcik's own pocket. He estimates the final cost to be about \$96,000.

He modeled his sculpture after a horseshoe crab that he bought on eBay. He and two other artists — Mark Giampietro and Matthew Lees — worked for about 500 hours over six weeks on the sculpture, nicknamed "Princess Zooey Deschanel," because one of the men has a crush on the actress.



Andrew Miller/For The Star-Ledger Christopher Wojcik stands inside the 25,000-pound concrete sculpture of a horseshoe crab he has built. Wojcik hopes his creation may become part of New Jersey's artificial reef program.

The horseshoe crab is technically not a crab at all, but rather a 350-million-year-old species more closely related to a spider, said Cindy Zipf, executive director of Clean Ocean Action, a nonprofit group based near Sandy Hook.

"We're very supportive of the project," she said. "It's an interesting and unique way to celebrate one of the most fascinating creatures on the planet."

Zipf said Wojcik's choice of a horseshoe crab makes sense, because New Jersey has one of the most densely populated areas in the world for the ancient animal.

The sculpture's shape is perfect for an artificial reef. It will provide plenty of surface area for crustaceans and other sea life to latch onto, and its shape makes it able to resist currents that would otherwise overturn it.

Soon the sculpture will be home to other animals when Wojcik uses a large crane to lower it gently into the water. Its final resting place will be an underwater graveyard for tugboats, barges and discarded U.S. Army tanks roughly three miles from the shore.

There the art installation will become the newest piece of playground equipment for a wide range of sea life.

Blackfish and black sea bass will be the first, swimming around the sculpture within hours after it comes to a rest on the sea floor 80 feet below the ocean's surface. That night lobsters may explore the sculpture. Some may even choose to call it home. Mussels, starfish and crabs will follow. Within weeks, Wojcik's entire creation will be encrusted with a wide variety of marine life.

"It's like a forest or any other sort of evolution," Wojcik said. "It starts out bare, and it becomes a mature environment. It works itself into a sort of equilibrium where things are dying and being created at pretty much the same rate."

New Jersey's artificial reef program was developed to provide a habitat for marine life while acting as a destination for anglers and divers.

But Wojcik's project comes at a time when the state's artificial reef program is threatened by a dispute between commercial and recreational fishermen. Sport anglers say commercial fishing interests are blocking access to the reefs with pots they have installed on the underwater structures. The program has not had funding in more than a year after federal officials restricted the use of its money to create and maintain reefs because of the disagreement.

John Organ, chief of the Division of Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the state has not been able to manage the reefs properly. State bills that would restrict commercial fishing on artificial reefs have not been passed by legislators.

"The state informed us several years ago that conflicts with commercial potters were interfering with the project," Organ said. "We allowed them time to see if they could resolve the situation, but regulations they proposed that would have addressed the issue were not

approved."

Larry Ragonese, a spokesman for the state's Department of Environmental Protection, said the state is working with the two groups to end the dispute.

"We'd like to get this resolved yesterday," Ragonese said. "We've been pretty close to reaching an agreement for reef construction in federal waters."

The reef site where Wojcik's sculpture will be deposited is a 4-square-mile stretch of ocean in federal waters.

He hopes once his enormous creation settles on the ocean floor the reef will be the largest underwater sculpture in the world.

"I always wanted to be in the Guinness Book of World Records," he said. "I thought I was going to have to eat a bunch of hotdogs."

Star-Ledger staff writer Amy Nutt contributed to this report.

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