

Navy dives in to save coastlines

By clearing away old fishing nets, tires and more, sailors aim to help environment, sharpen diving skills

By Traci Watson
USA TODAY

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Environmental problems plaguing America's coastal waters are being tackled by an unlikely group: Navy divers.

In the past two years, sailors who normally spend their time doing underwater demolitions or salvaging ships have started cleaning up coastal messes that are so expensive or so vast that they overwhelm civilian governments. The work also gives the divers experience that sharpens their skills.

Navy divers plan to start whittling away next spring at a 37-acre pile of old tires smothering the coral reefs off Fort Lauderdale. In August, a Navy team did underwater reconnaissance to assess the best way of removing the pile, the remains of an unsuccessful artificial reef created in the 1970s.

This summer, divers from the Army and Navy helped collect some of the thousands of tons of old fishing nets draped over the bottom of Puget Sound in Washington state. It was the second summer that Navy divers have helped rid the sound of the nets, some of them decades old.

Federal officials also hope to enlist military divers to



help clean up a new national marine preserve in the Hawaiian Islands, says William Nuckols of Coastal America, a coalition of federal agencies that works on ocean issues.

By outward appearances, military divers don't fit the stereotype of "tree-hugging" environmentalists, but the divers say they are committed to the cause.

"We're big, bad, hairy-chested deep-sea divers," jokes Navy Chief Warrant Officer Dan Mikulski, among those who inspected the tire pile. "When you actually see the magnitude of the tires, it doesn't take an environmentalist to know ... we need to get the tires out of there for the good of our country."

Adds Chief Warrant Officer Mark Thomas, who helped remove nets from Puget Sound this summer, "I have three little girls who are one day going to be diving in these waters, and I want it to be clean and safe for them, too."

The two projects are underway to both help the environment and give sailors needed training, Mikulski and Thomas say.

Commercial divers know how to collect trash from the ocean, but they're expensive and lack some of the cut-

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ting-edge technology and abilities Navy and Army divers take for granted.

Military aid "is going to open to natural-resource agencies a whole world of possibilities that they wouldn't otherwise have," Nuckols says.

For instance, military divers routinely descend to below 100 feet. That allows them to snag debris that's out of reach of commercial divers, who can't go that deep unless a costly decompression chamber is on hand, says Jeff June, a marine biologist whose company, Natural Resources, is helping clean up Puget Sound.

Just as helpful is the cost of the divers' labor: nothing. Without the military's involvement, picking up these tires off the Florida coast would cost roughly \$20 a tire, says Kenneth Banks of the Broward County Department of Environmental Protection in Florida.

The expense of picking up the 1 million to 2 million tires would be "overwhelming," without the military divers, he says. "The value of their effort is huge."

The tires were dumped three decades ago in the hopes they would attract fish and encourage coral growth. Instead, little if any marine life has taken root on the smooth rubber, which remains so intact that divers can read the names of the tire manufacturers.

Even worse, the ties that once held the piles of tires together have broken. The tires, pushed by storms, have pulverized real coral reefs and kept new coral from growing.

Military divers aren't willing to pick up any ocean trash. Instead, they choose cleanups that allow them to gain new expertise or to practice past lessons.

In Puget Sound, divers from both the Navy and the Army have learned how to handle fishing nets that can ensnare a diver. The nets are expanses of nearly invisible filament, often as long as a football field and littered with hooks.

Nets also can be used to block harbors during hostilities, so learning how to safely remove them is "a perfect opportunity for us to go out and perform a real-world operation that actually ties into what we really do," Thomas says.

Picking up tires isn't as risky but still presents challenges. The work takes place at depths of 70 feet, "a long way down," Mikulski says, so divers must limit their work sessions to 50 minutes. Even the logistics of packing for the mission helps, he says.

Environmentalists have often clashed with the Navy over dumping old ships in the ocean and sonar tests that they say harm whales, but they say the military deserves credit for the cleanups.

"The Navy, like any large bureaucracy, is a mixture of good and bad," says Joel Reynolds of the Natural Resources Defense Council. But "combining training with environmental remediation ... seems to me a good idea."

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Objectives

Students will:

- ▶ Read and discuss “Navy dives in to save coastlines.”
- ▶ Process the article and state what would motivate them to clean up the ocean.
- ▶ Localize the story by recognizing what can be cleaned up in their neighborhoods.
- ▶ Research an ocean conservancy group.

Preparation

Each student will need:

- ▶ A copy of “Navy dives in to save coastlines.”
- ▶ Internet access (optional).
- ▶ A copy of the lesson.

20 minutes – Read and discuss it

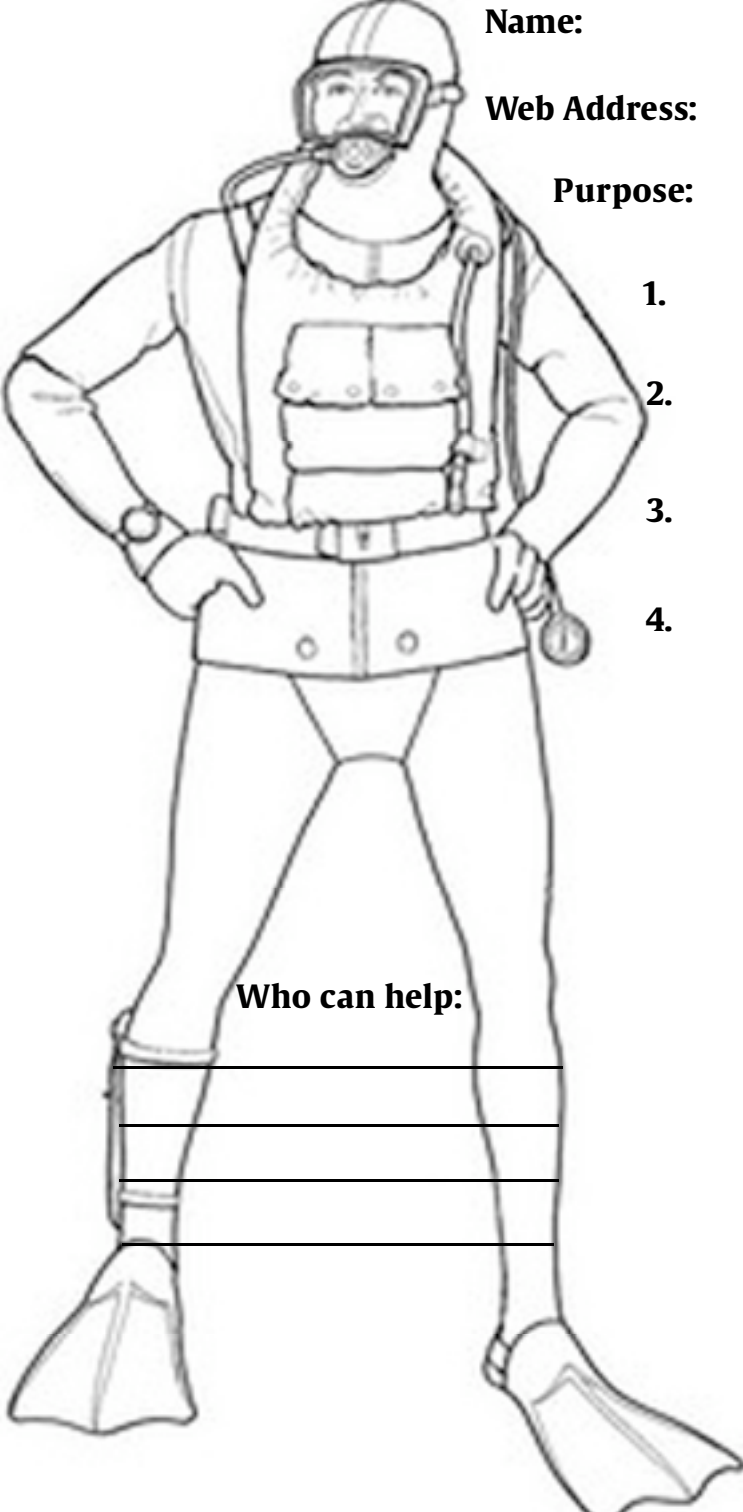
In groups of three or four, read the article and discuss the questions.

- ▶ What do military divers normally do?
- ▶ What are some of the unusual projects they are working on, according to the article?
- ▶ How do these unusual projects tie into and reinforce their training?
- ▶ What are some advantages of using military divers over commercial divers?
- ▶ Some of the divers have their own personal reasons for wanting to be involved in these cleanup efforts. If you were involved in these cleanup efforts, what personal reasons would motivate you?
- ▶ In what ways can you help clean up around you? At school? In your neighborhood? In the parks?

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25 Minutes - Analyze it

Many non-profit and government groups are involved in cleaning up and conserving bodies of water. Research one of those organizations on the Internet. With information from that website, complete the graphic below by writing down the name of the organization, its web address, its purposes, who can volunteer with them, and several of the issues that the organization is passionate about.

ISSUES	 <p>Name:</p> <p>Web Address:</p> <p>Purpose:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.3.4. <p>Who can help:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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In the box below, write down three ways you can be involved in helping clean up local bodies of water. Which project interests you the most? Why?

1.

2.

3.

10 minutes – Apply it

As a class, stand in a circle (each student should have his/her graphic organizer handy). Throw a ball to a student – the student who catches the ball should share information about the organization he/she researched (including the group's purpose, the issues/projects it focuses on, and what drew the student to that group). Write the name of the organization on the board. The student that just shared should then throw the ball to another student, who will share his/her information. Continue in this fashion until all students have shared or as time allows.

At the end of “ball throw” discussion, have students share ways they listed about being involved in local water clean up.