

AMAZING REEF, AMAZING WORMS!

By Mark Perry, Executive Director, Florida Oceanographic Society

That's right, worms! The Bathtub Reef is built by the Sabellariid (Sa-bell-AIR-id) worms, specifically (*Phragmatopoma caudata*). These amazing marine worms are only about one inch long but start out as very tiny, free-swimming animals in the turbulent surf zone of the Atlantic Ocean shoreline. Millions of eggs are released and fertilized (generally in October) and the free-swimming worms begin to grow and look for a place to attach. They usually find the already-built worm reef or may attach to some other hard surface such as the coquina rock exposed at the shoreline. Once attached, they begin selecting the right size grains of sand and applying a cement to them while placing the sand in a cylindrical tube surrounding their soft body. These remarkable worms work like stone masons, laying up block to make a house, and they do this in the roughest conditions of the pounding ocean surf.

As one worm builds next to another, they form large colonies of living reef, with 60,000 individual tubes per square meter. When the tide is low, the worm reef is exposed and the worms go way down inside their tube homes. When the tide is high and the ocean covers the reef, the worms come to the top of their tube and put out their tiny, sticky tentacles to catch food floating in the water. At low tide again, they go back down inside their tubes. So when you visit the reef at low tide you will see the exposed colonies of thousands upon thousands of reef-building worms. When you look closely you can see the sand tubes one next to the other but please don't walk on the reef as that would kill the worms and destroy the reef.

When the reef is exposed at low tide it forms a calm, shallow area between the reef and the beach, much like a "bathtub" so that's how it got the name "Bathtub Reef." Amid the tide pools of the exposed reef and below the water there are hundreds of marine plants and animals including many varieties of tropical fish that make the reef their home. It is a great place to learn about the reef environment and begin to discover the underwater world with a mask and snorkel. Please be a good steward of the environment and only take pictures and memories while leaving the critters in their homes. Tell others about these incredible worms that build the reef and remind them to be careful not to walk on the reef, so together we can protect this important living resource!

Visit Florida Oceanographic Coastal Center to see the Sabellariid worm reef display at the Visitor Center.

For additional information about Florida Oceanographic visit www.fos-cc.org