

RONALD McDONALD GOES TO SEA

We normally don't associate McDonald's colorful emissary with sportfishing. But when the Ronald McDonald House and a dedicated group of fisheries scientists combine their efforts, the results can benefit children, families, fishermen and SCUBA divers alike.

Since the 1970s, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources' (SCDNR) Marine Artificial Reef Program has been creating artificial reefs off the Carolina coast. These reefs provide habitat for many economically valuable species, plus prime sites for fishermen and recreational divers.

But in 2012, we had a more unconventional deployment than our usual fare of old subway cars, concrete pipes and retired army vehicles. The Ronald McDonald House in Charleston had gutted dozens of steel railings to install their antimicrobial counterparts. But instead of trashing the old railings, the Directors asked us to deploy them at sea and take photographs of the new reef for the families they serve. So in May 2012, with the assistance of the captain and crew of SCDNR's *R/V Palmetto*, we welded together and deployed the newly dubbed "McSteel" railings amid turbulent seas and buffeting winds.

Follow-up diving had to wait until October, when we found McSteel gradually becoming part of the sea. The old railings had created a new oasis in an underwater desert of sand. Soft corals and algae were already gaining a foothold, and we found a wide array of species enjoying Ronald McDonald's hospitality.

To this day, I'm still not sure who came out best – the fish, the families, the fishermen or us divers. But we all agree that the greatest treasure from this unique deployment is the smiles from the children and families served by the Ronald McDonald House when they look at photographs of a reef they helped build, and realize the common thread they share with the divers and the sea.