Athleticism can often be an inheritance. As children, we grow up watching the sports our parents love, be it soccer, basketball, or football, crowded around the TV during game-day, rooting for our favorite team.

For my family, it was scuba diving. Our team was a buddy system. My version of counting goals was counting bubbles at the surface until I was old enough to get certified to dive and join my family underwater in places most people only ever get to dream about.

Traveling to explore reefs was a fantastic benefit of the sport, but after seeing what was out there in the southern, warmer waters, the curiosity about what was in my own backyard began to peak.

Hidden within Long Island’s waters are several—and some odd—artificial reefs and sunken ships teeming with marine life. Late last season, New York sunk the Canal Corporation’s 74-foot tugboat Reliable, creating a diving destination where you can find starfish clinging to the unique structures of the boat, and many fish inside its cabin. And it’s located just twenty minutes south of Shinnecock Inlet.

“We saw schools of juvenile black fish,” said Joseph Sferrazza, president of the NYC Sea Gypsies, a scuba club. He frequently dives the tug, noting that they also see skates, black sea bass (much to the delight of anglers), sea robins, and even eels that can be found hiding out in the crevices of the artificial reef. The structure of the boat is a haven for these fish, providing them with shelter and food as barnacles and mussels cling to the tugs.

“They become their own little ecosystems,” Sferrazza noted. Last summer there was even a school of sand-tiger sharks circling the area, drawn in by the abundance of prey that had settled there, which, in turn, drew in more adrenaline-seeking divers. While some people only get to see the sharks at the Long Island Aquarium in Riverhead, divers have the opportunity to see those same misunderstood creatures up close on the dives they do right here in Long Island’s waters.
Expanding and Improving Long Island’s Sunken Treasures

Many people may not be familiar with New York’s marine resources, including the artificial reef sites off Long Island, which are affectionately known as “Long Island’s Sunken Treasures.” Located in New York's coastal waters, these artificial reefs attract popular fish species, expand opportunities for sport fishing, and provide great sites for divers to explore.

In 2018, Governor Cuomo directed the largest expansion of Long Island’s artificial reefs in state history. Twelve existing reef sites received a variety of materials—including rocks and concrete, former bridge materials, and retired vessels—placed in strategic locations to improve marine life and boost the region’s recreation.

We encourage people with an interest in marine diving or fishing to check out the reefs. Marine life, such as scup, fluke, black sea bass, lobster and other marine species, are moving into the reef structures, enhancing these waters and creating exciting new recreational opportunities in the Long Island region, which is already known as a great destination for those who love the outdoors.

Knowing that artificial reefs can help replenish the marine environment means the new reefs being created could be a potential game changer, both for the natural, marine world and for scuba divers all over. “Within the last twenty years or so the scuba diving community has shrunk,” Sferrazza commented, which is something I had noticed as well over the course of my decade-long diving career. Most people tend to flock to warmer waters, not just for the temperature, but also for the marine life down there. But these new and expanded reefs can create a different kind of environment, one that might appeal to the younger generation (with the proper gear to keep you warm of course).

Each reef, whether artificial or natural, is essential to the growth and population of marine life, which not only draws in more divers like myself and my family, but also is tremendously beneficial to the environment. The careful placement and sinking of these ships (and tugboats, barges, and other materials) help the environment flourish, which is important given that a number of natural reefs are dying at a rapid rate.

Diving the reefs of Hawaii when I was ten versus when I was twenty was a shock and wake-up call for me when I got to see firsthand how quickly those reefs were dying, and how much the sea life had shrunk during that decade. An approved, environmentally friendly system of artificial reefs might just be the answer we and our oceans are looking for to give these marine animals a chance to replenish their numbers. New York’s reefs are clearly an investment in our environment and our future.

Long Island native and enthusiastic diver Amy Lipsky has completed approximately 200 open-water ocean dives.

Editor’s note: To learn more about New York’s artificial reefs, check out the October 2018 issue of Conservationist.