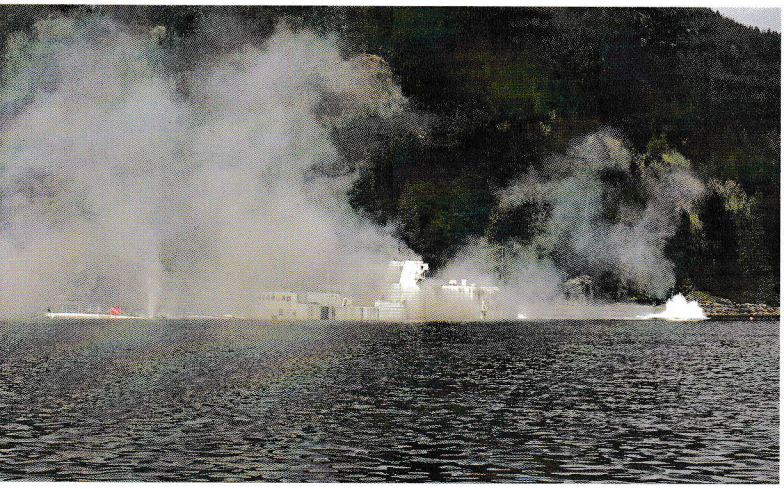
ANNAPOLIS JOINS

THE ARTIFICIAL REEF SOCIETY OF BC HAS DONE IT AGAIN, THIS TIME RIGHT NEXT



Photos: Trisha Stovel

At 13:07 on April 4, 2015, a quick series of explosions thundered across the calm waters of Halkett Bay, Gambier Island, BC. Just a tick over two minutes later, the ex-Canadian Navy warship HMCS *Annapolis* slid gracefully below the surface to the resounding cheers of over a thousand on-lookers aboard more than 200 vessels standing by.

The sinking was the culmination of seven years of diligent work by the Artificial Reef Society of BC on a project that at times seemed doomed. Although the ARSBC had successfully completed seven previous reef projects in BC, including four navy ships of similar class, the *Annapolis* project had been by far the most difficult.

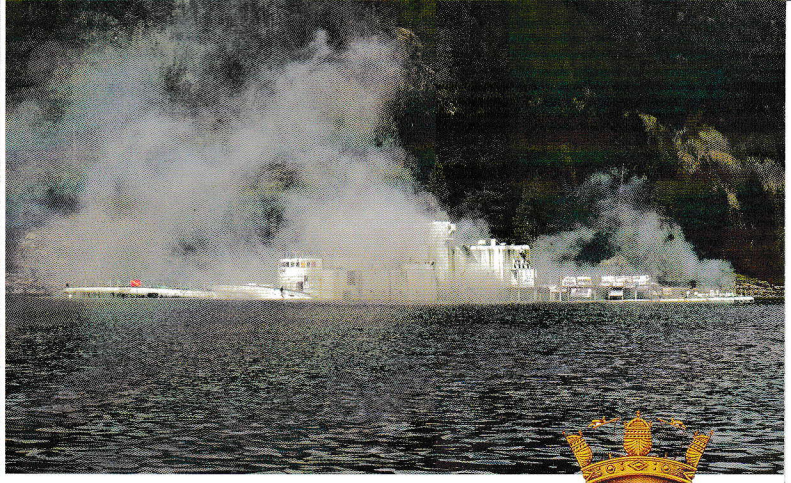
ARSBC President Howard Robins, the Society's Board of Directors, dozens of corporate sponsors, First Nation and government agencies, technical advisors and nearly a thousand volunteers had plenty to be proud of. In the end they had prevailed, creating an expertly prepared artificial reef close to downtown Vancouver.

Shortly after the sinking I caught up with Robins, an exhausted, but very happy man.

INTERVIEW BY NEIL MCDANIEL

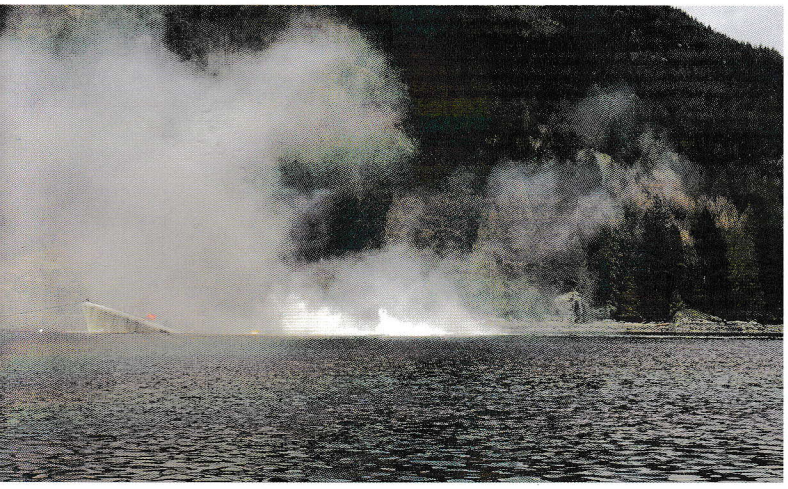
The former HMCS *Annapolis* sank in two minutes and one second. A crowd of more than 200 boats watched

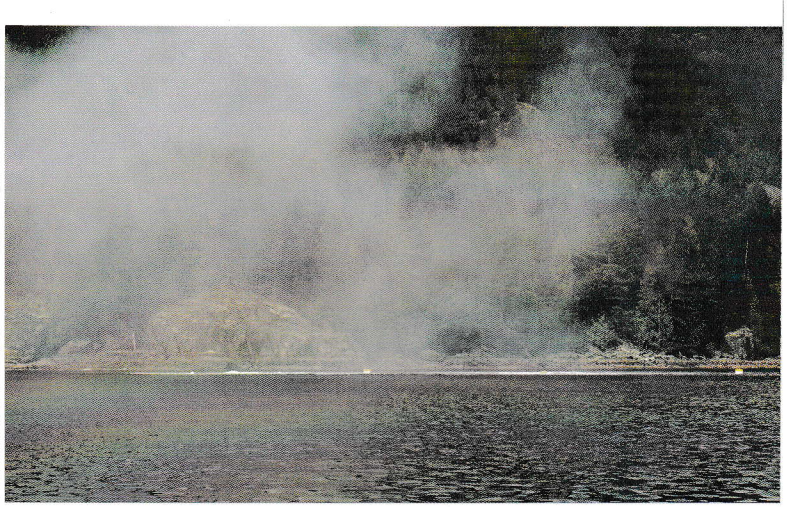
When commissioned in 1964 the *Annapolis* and her twin the *Nipigon* were considered the most capable anti-submarine destroyers in the world



SUNKEN FLEET

TO VANCOUVER AND ITS MANY RESIDENT AND VISITING DIVERS





HMCS ANNAPOLIS BY THE NUMBERS

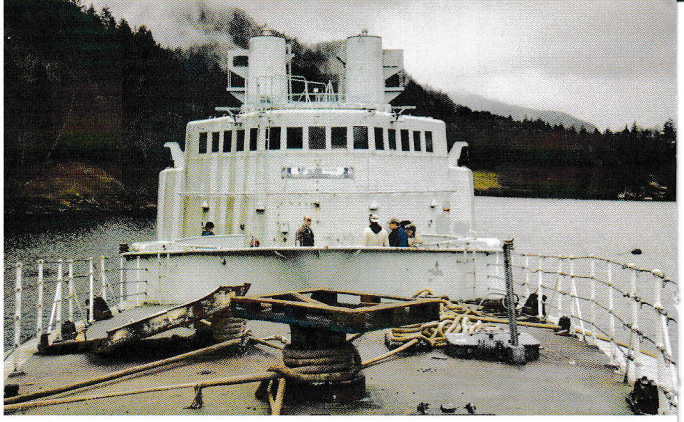
THE VESSEL
- Hull number 265
- Built in Halifax, Nova Scotia1964
- 371 feet (113m) long
- 2900 tonnes fully laden
- Top speed 28 knots
- 12 officers, 234 crew
- 8th artificial reef created by the ARSBC

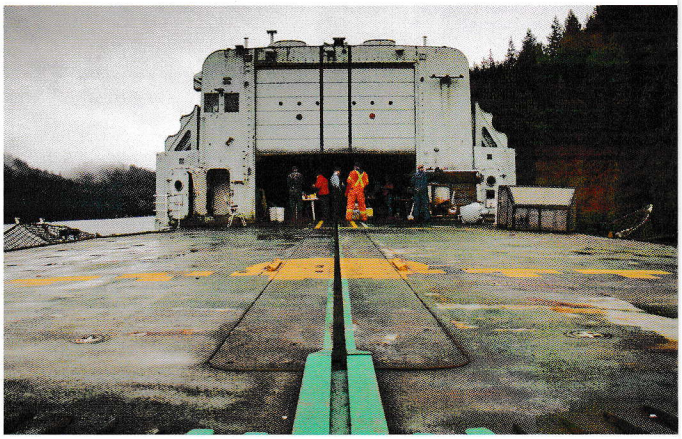
MILITARY SERVICE
- Helicopter carrying destroyer escort (DDH)
- Single Sea King helicopter
- Steam turbine powered
- Commissioned December 1964
- Named after Annapolis River in Nova Scotia
- 32-year service life
- Steamed 750,000 nautical miles (1,389,000 km)
- Decommissioned December 1996
- Paid off to Crown Assets 1998

THE SALVAGE PROCESS
- 550-600 tons of scrap metal removed and recycled
- 1,000 volunteer workers
- 17,000 volunteer hours

TIMELINE
- April, 2008: ARSBC acquired the Annapolis from Crown Assets
- June, 2008: Vessel towed to Long Bay, Gambier Island
- 2008 through 2015: Moored in Long Bay during salvage and diver preparations
- March 31, 2015: Towed to Halkett Bay
- April 4, 2015: Scuttled

THE ARSBC FLEET
- Coastal freighter GB Church, scuttled Aug. 11, 1991 at Portland Island
- Destroyer escort Chaudiere, scuttled Dec. 5, 1992 in Sechelt Inlet
- Destroyer escort Mackenzie, scuttled Sept. 16 at Gooch Island
- Destroyer escort Columbia, scuttled June 22, 1996 at Maude Island
- Destroyer escort Saskatchewan, scuttled June 14, 1997 at Snake Island
- Fleet maintenance vessel Cape Breton, scuttled Oct. 20, 2001 at Snake Island
- Boeing 737, scuttled Jan. 14, 2006 at Chemainus
- Helicopter-carrying destroyer Annapolis, scuttled Apr. 4, 2015 at Halkett Bay





DIVER: What were your thoughts when you first saw the *Annapolis* dockside in Esquimalt back in 2007?

Howie Robins: Given that *Annapolis* had a helicopter hanger, flight deck and flying bridge, I knew it had significant external features unlike her sister ships. We estimated that the configuration of the superstructure provided at least 40 percent more surface space for marine habitat and a huge bonus for recreational diving. I also envisioned a reef project that could be more than just another wreck site. *Annapolis* would be a working reef, one that promoted biological study, rescue training, even a platform for submersible training.

The preparation of this ship dragged on far longer than previous projects. What were the major obstacles the ARSBC confronted?

There were a number of elements that forced the project to go overtime. The stock market downturn affected our ability to maximize yield on metal salvage. This meant hiring skilled labour was no longer an option. The volunteers who put in the time and sweat equity every weekend became the core of the project. They understood the difficult times we faced and rallied to help keep the project moving forward and eventually to a successful conclusion.

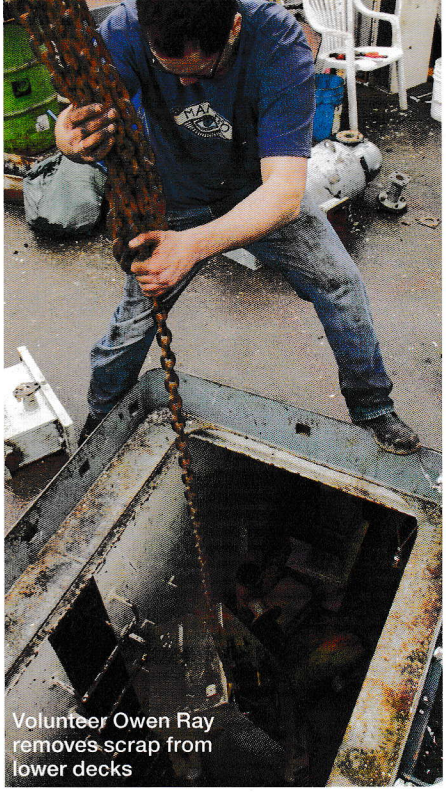
Environmental concerns about the possibility of low-level PCBs in the bulkhead insulation of the ship caused further delays. The government stepped in to remediate the ship and remove this material and the ship was eventually certified free of PCBs but we lost seven months of productive work.

"The superstructure configuration provides at least 40 percent more surface area for marine life habitat"

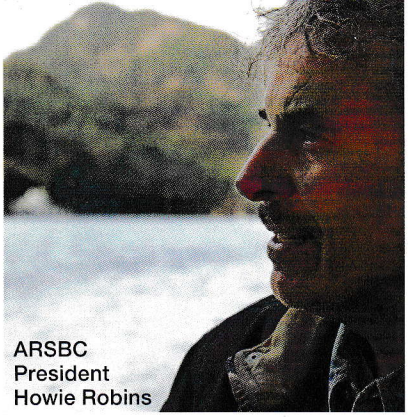
Left: HMCS *Annapolis* at dock during her heyday. Top: Volunteers clean the bow of the *Annapolis*. Middle: Scrap metal awaiting removal. Above: Workers break for a well earned BBQ

The physical work on the ship was done at sea in a secluded bay and not at dockside. Our reality was years of shuttling volunteers back and forth to this site. At the time, efforts were made to try to get into port but with the 2010 Winter Olympics coming to Vancouver, nothing was available. Under normal conditions we would be at a dockside facility, making it much

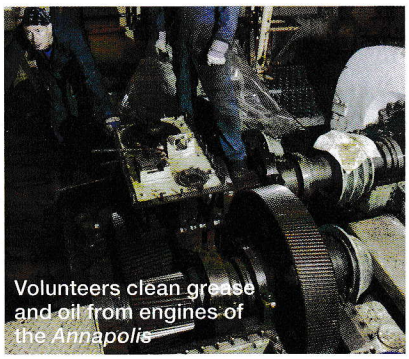
Photos: Jeffrey Gallant, Trisha Stovel



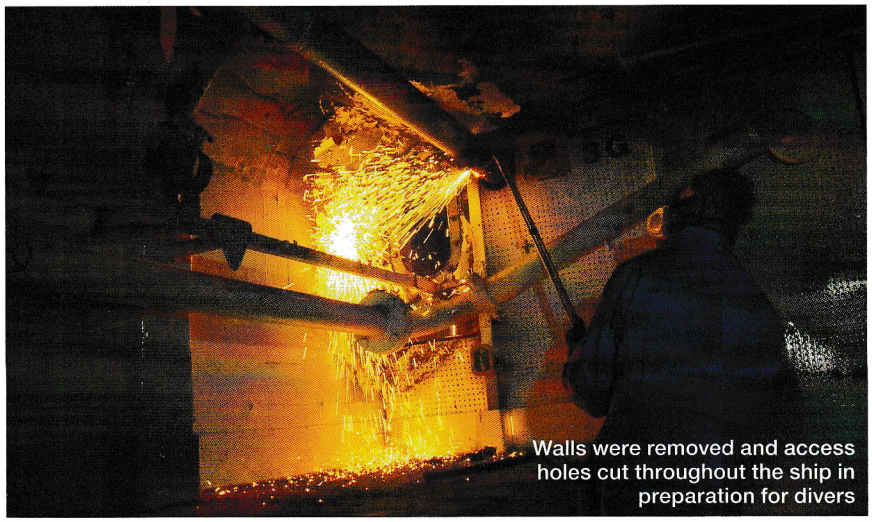
Volunteer Owen Ray removes scrap from lower decks



ARSBC President Howie Robins



Volunteers clean grease and oil from engines of the *Annapolis*



Walls were removed and access holes cut throughout the ship in preparation for divers

Photos: Trisha Stovel, Neil McDaniel

easier to access and work on the ship.

There were also several legal challenges to deal with, especially from a group of local property owners who were opposed to the project.

Due to the long process and many difficulties, did you ever reach the point where you just felt like walking away from the project?

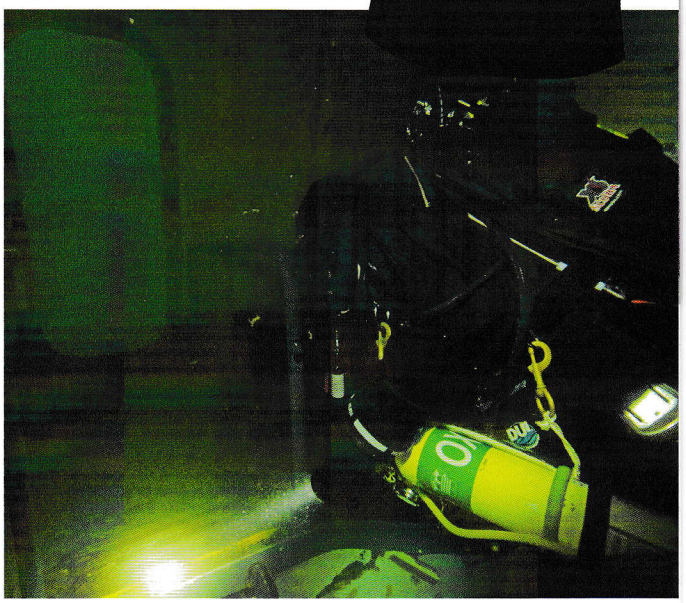
There was never a time I was not confident we would prevail. If I thought any other way the outcome would have been very different. Walking away is tantamount to making your problem someone else's problem but we are not about that. The ASRBC ran the gauntlet with challenges, obstacles and many frustrating days. It was a roller coaster ride of emotional ups and downs and sometimes through this process friendships got trashed while other new alliances formed. There was dogged determination to protect the project from those who tried everything to arrest and obtain a court ordered sale of the ship while others tried to disrupt and stop the project entirely. I am proud that during the tough days when others hoped we would fail, we overcame each issue responsibly and respectfully and the ARSBC is still held in high regard for that.

How much time did you devote personally to the *Annapolis* project?

I spent nearly every volunteer weekend working with the on-board crews. As well I spent thousands of hours managing the project through the political and legal matters. It was a full-time job working towards the goals we had established.

Framed by coastal mountains, the *Annapolis* is towed to her final resting place in Halkett Bay, within Howe Sound, next door to Vancouver

Local business Sea Dragon Charters, produced celebratory shirts



Describe some of the unique features of this ship reef compared to previous ARSBC efforts such as the *Chaudiere* and *Columbia*.

The *Annapolis* landed perfectly upright and is at ideal depths, lying in about 100 feet (30m) of water. It will provide a wonderful and safe dive experience for novice, intermediate and advanced divers, alike. Tech divers will enjoy the wide-open spaces of the engine and boiler rooms. Large openings reveal the internal workings of the ship's machinery spaces. The ship also features specially designed safety-stop stations attached to the mooring lines.

Describe the activities during the last few days prior to sinking.

What last-minute things had to get done?

Our work leading up to the sinking focused on venting and ballasting. We flooded all tanks with water to lower the ship as much as possible. We had to ensure that the ship remained in a clean state for Environment Canada's final walk-through. Banners and GoPro cameras were set in place. All the while, the explosives team worked to install the linear shape charges and redundant systems inside the hull. A log boom was placed across the entrance to Halkett Bay for spectators to raft up to.

Describe your feelings when you heard the first explosive charges go off on the sinking day.

My feelings were of great pride, not just in the sinking event but also for all the people that I worked with to make it happen. *Annapolis* was placed on the sea floor flawlessly, upright and at the correct depth. My feeling of accomplishment had to sink in for a while as it did for many others I've spoken with.

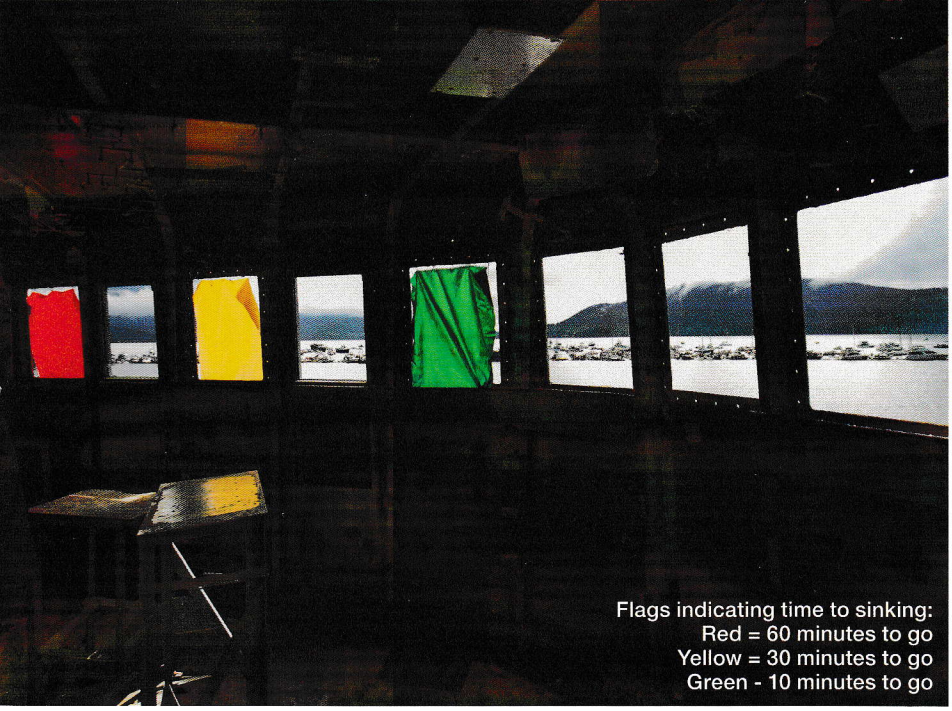
"The Annapolis landed perfectly upright in 100 feet (30m)... offering a safe dive experience for all divers"

Left: The first underwater image to come from the Annapolis shows diver Trisha Stovel next to sign that reads: "Naval Air Station Annapolis Altitude 30 feet", now -60 feet!

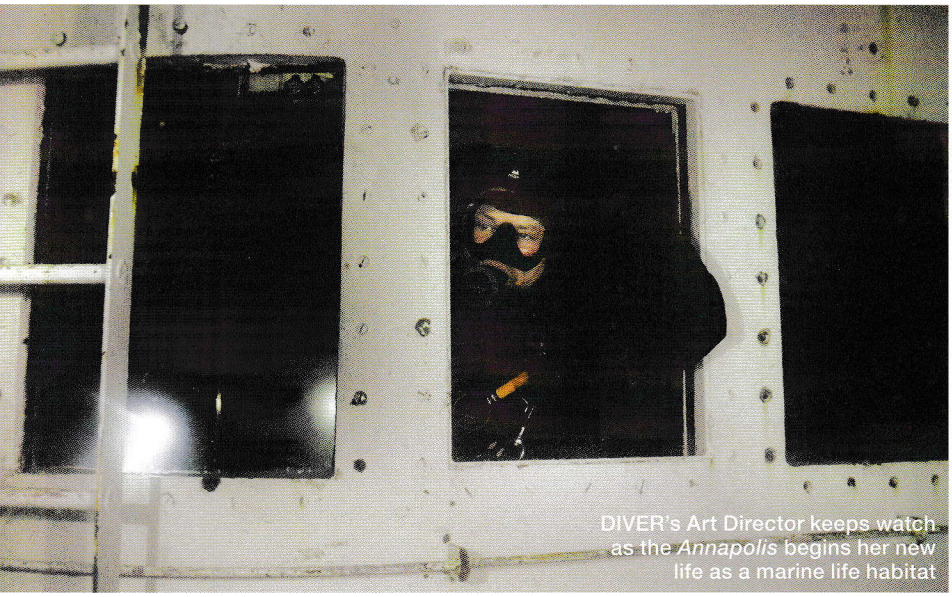
What's next for the Artificial Reef Society?

The Directors of the Society had been formulating a number of long-term goals well in advance of the sinking of *Annapolis*. One of these

Photos: Trisha Stovel, Russell Clark, Jennifer A Titus



Flags indicating time to sinking:
Red = 60 minutes to go
Yellow = 30 minutes to go
Green - 10 minutes to go



DIVER's Art Director keeps watch as the *Annapolis* begins her new life as a marine life habitat

Photos: Russell Clark, Trisha Stovel

is Project A.B.I.S. (Annapolis Bio-diversity Index Study.) The ARSBC will be working with government agencies and NGOs to record the biological changes that will occur on the *Annapolis* seasonally.

Working with the greater dive community, we will also be reviewing the condition of all our project reefs, with a plan to update and maintain the moorings.

Our website is currently undergoing revision and will include a user-friendly database about our projects with some new features. The ARSBC will be reviewing options toward organizing an active membership that will open up opportunities for volunteers to contribute to future projects.

Since the successful completion of the *Annapolis* project, the Reef Society has been in early stage discussions with other interested parties about reefing projects that are unique opportunities for British Columbia. We are also receiving requests from outside Canada for our management expertise.

What's next for you personally?

I plan to travel to Israel this year with my wife, then enjoy a relaxing summer of camping and motor-cycling. I've been out of cold-water diving for six years but plan to get back into it this summer and I look forward to diving *Annapolis* and all our other projects over the years. [ ]

[To see the full list of sponsors and for more information, pictures and video, visit the ARSBC website at: *www.artificialreef.bc.ca*]