

# The Fantastic Transformation of Subway Cars into Artificial Reefs

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Stephen Mallon/Front Room Gallery

[John Metcalfe](#)

**A photographer spent years watching heavy machinery hurl MTA cars into the Atlantic.**

Few people can say they've journeyed far offshore to watch an excavator sling 18-ton [subway](#) cars into the briny deep. [Stephen Mallon](#)'s been there seen that, though, and his photographic proof is as crazy as you'd imagine.

Mallon's adventures on the high seas began one day in 2007, when he noticed a barge stacked with train cars in Bayonne, New Jersey. After chatting with a security guard, he learned it was part of an ambitious MTA endeavor to recycle its decommissioned fleet into artificial reefs.

The agency was stripping the cars—removing motors, wheels, hydraulics, seats, windows, light fixtures, and Freon from the A/C systems—and dumping them overboard so far into the ocean you couldn't see land. The rusty conveyances initially served as shelter for invertebrates and migrating fish. As time passed they attracted scads more marine life, including sharks, economically important game fish, and [at least one](#) curious sea turtle.

"They did it for 10 years," says Mallon, who's 42 and lives in Brooklyn. "They put more than 2,500 subway cars into the Atlantic."

*The New York Times* [provides background](#) on the undertaking:

“A decade ago, in a moment of inspiration, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority stumbled on a way to help the environment and its own bottom line: donating retired subway trains to the little-known cause of creating artificial reefs....

Sinking the subway cars cost about half as much as selling them for scrap, and the agency could avoid the expensive process of removing asbestos from the cars' floors and walls. While some states initially rejected the cars, fearing contamination from asbestos, a report from the Environmental Protection Agency found the materials posed little risk to creatures in the water.”

After seeing the New Jersey barge, Mallon talked with the contractor handling the project and soon found himself waking up at the buttcrack of dawn to head out to sea. For the next several years, he documented the seeding of the ocean with ancient commuter hulks in Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and South Carolina. He even accompanied the reefing crew during its last excursion in 2010 (the MTA ended the program because newer cars have more plastic and are costly to strip).

To his credit, Mallon only barfed once. "There's one image where you see the barge getting hit by a wave higher than it and the subway cars on top," he says. "That's the one time I lost my breakfast. But I was told the people on the boat, experienced crewmen, they lost their breakfasts too, so I wasn't exactly an amateur."

Mallon's time riding the sinking subway is part of an ongoing exhibit at [New York University's Kimmel Galleries](#); the show, which includes his other investigations into [massive recycling jobs](#) and the salvaging of the 2009 flight that [landed in the Hudson](#), runs until March 16. For folks who can't make it, here's a selection from the MTA series, called "Next Stop Atlantic":



