

Balseros, they are called. It's a Spanish word for sea-faring rafters. Some spend months building their boats, secretly gathering available materials from which to improvise an escape craft. Their vessel might be a fishing boat, modified with high-walled gunnels so it can carry more people. Or it might simply be a blue tarp filled with buoyant spray foam, bedsheets for sails and a coffee-can rudder.

# INNOVATIONS *of desperation*

*refugee*  
**CRAFT**  
*carry history,  
hope forward*

by Karuna EBERL

Whether compelled by poverty, a natural disaster or fear of government persecution, generations of people have been driven to become *balseros*, risking their lives to cross the open ocean on the chance that after enduring several days of blistering sunshine, unpredictable waves, sharks, and jellyfish, they'll be lucky enough to bump into a tiny string of islands and the hope that they have to offer.

In just the last 20 years, more than 50,000 people from Cuba, plus tens of thousands more from Haiti and other Caribbean, South and Central American countries, have decided that this was their best option. Once they made it to shore, their once-prized, vital link to freedom - their boat - was suddenly obsolete, cast aside where it landed, reduced to just a bit of novel garbage tucked along the mangroves.

"For years, these boats were seen more or less as trash," says marine archaeologist Joshua Marano. "But what we can learn from their features and modifications really sheds a lot of light on the people who made them. When you start to pay attention, you can see the ingenuity and the thought process. You also start to get an idea of how desperate they must have been, to decide to cross with 20 people crammed into a boat the size of a Honda Civic."

Interests in migration by sea brought archaeologists and agencies like Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN), Biscayne

National Park, and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) together to document refugee craft. The collaboration resulted in a centralized database, where both scientists and community members can report their findings.

These vessels are quite unique. For example, some boats have hidden compartments in which to keep food dry. Many of their fabricators went to great lengths to fit car engines with propellers, and to figure out where to put exhaust pipes so they don't take on water.

A trait some boats share is a blue-painted hull. This helps camouflage it in the water, decreasing the odds of being intercepted by the Coast Guard, and for some it holds religious significance as a color of protection. Some also paint the bottom white, so if they do capsize, they are more likely to be seen and rescued. One such boat Marano found on Dry Tortugas also had freshly painted Santeria blessings to Yemaya, the goddess of the sea and all living things. Apparently she listened, as all 23 refugees aboard survived the crossing.



| **Above (top and right):** "Everybody likes to talk about the engines they find that have been repurposed out of cars," says Joshua Marano, who has come across ones from all over the world, including some marked CCCP from the former Soviet republic | **Above (left):** Rosemary Abbitt and Nicole Uibel, employees of FKNMS, document the remains of migrant craft in the Marquesas. The craft were adapted to cross 90 miles of ocean, often carrying many people over their capacity. All of the vessels were documented in March 2017, before being removed due to environmental and navigational hazards |

*“It just shows it really must feel like your only option”*

*- Sara Ayers-Rigsby*



Photos by Brenda ALTMEIER

Tragically, not all are so fortunate. No one knows for sure, but researchers believe at least one in four die on the journey. As such, documenting these craft becomes a way to keep a human face on a period in history that might otherwise be too broad and painful to relate to.

“Think about 500 years from now,” says Sara Ayers-Rigsby, an archaeologist with FPAN. “History tends to focus on world leaders and larger global political issues, but it doesn’t really address what’s happening to the average person, the person making that boat. Having that physical artifact documented is critical to telling that story of people fleeing governments with such intensity that they are using these makeshift vessels.”

Last spring as Ayers-Rigsby was helping document boats on the Marquesas, she was particularly taken off guard by an artifact she found - a child’s backpack.

“It is profoundly moving to see all of these things people had to leave behind,” she says. “You think about the story behind them. You think about if you were fleeing to a new country to start a new life, what would you bring with you. It just shows it really must feel like your only option.”

*Note: With last-year’s rescinding of the Cuban Adjustment Act, a.k.a. the wet-foot dry-foot policy, the refugee rafts have suddenly become a scarce commodity. Ayers-Rigsby of FPAN and Marano are encouraging community support for reporting abandoned refugee boats, regardless of how long they’ve been sitting there. Contact sayersrigsby@fau.edu with information, and for a link to the database reporting form. [FPAN is a program out of the University of Western Florida, partnering with Florida Atlantic University]*

**| Left (above):** Brenda Altmeier, of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, is a driving force behind documenting refugee craft. “Crossing the ocean to freedom is an incredible time in history here in the Keys,” she says. She found these boots in a driftwood hovel on a beach, “I am not positive, but could see how somebody could get inside to protect themselves from the sun” |