

CONTACT:
Karrie Carnes
305-809-4700 x236

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 19, 2010

REEF, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary to Host Inaugural Lionfish Derbies

NOAA's Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, in partnership with Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF), will host an inaugural series of lionfish derbies starting in September. Divers who remove lionfish from sanctuary waters will be eligible for more than \$10,000 in cash and prizes.

REEF and Sanctuary managers have been working with the Florida Keys dive community to remove invasive lionfish since early 2009. Scientists are concerned about the rapid population growth of lionfish in Keys waters and their lack of a natural predator in the Atlantic. Lionfish are known to feed on commercially and ecologically important fish species — including snapper, grouper and shrimp — and can disrupt the balance of the marine ecosystem.

“Current research is beginning to show that, if left unchecked, the impacts of lionfish could be devastating to our native marine life and coral reefs,” said Lad Akins, REEF director of operations. “Providing training and incentives for the public to remove lionfish is one way to control populations and minimize those impacts.”

Following detailed briefings on lionfish collecting and handling, divers will be allowed to collect fish on the day of the tournament using hand nets or spearfishing gear in areas of the sanctuary where fishing and spearfishing is allowed. The \$100 registration fee for a four-person team of divers or snorkelers provides participants with a pair of puncture resistant gloves and banquet tickets. Event banquets will feature a lionfish tasting for derby participants and guests.

“Eating lionfish is a conservation activity,” said Sean Morton, acting sanctuary superintendent. “We are its only known predator in the Atlantic and through dedicated diver-based removal efforts, and consumption of lionfish as a food source, we can control its establishment.”

NOAA has developed an [“Eat Lionfish” campaign](#) that brings together fishing communities, wholesalers, and chefs in an effort to broaden U.S. consumers’ awareness of this delicious invader.

For more information on the derbies and to register online, visit www.reef.org/lionfish. Dates and locations for the derbies are:

- Sept. 11 – Coconuts Restaurant, Key Largo
- Oct. 16 – Keys Fisheries Market and Marina, Marathon
- Nov. 13 — Hurricane Hole Marina, Key West

Florida Keys lionfish derbies are sponsored in part by: Ocean Reef Conservation Association, Divers Direct, Spree Expeditions, Inc., Dive Key West, Inc., and Scuba-Do Dive Company. To become an event sponsor, please contact Alecia@reef.org.

REEF-coordinated lionfish derbies in the Bahamas have removed almost 2,500 lionfish since 2009. Thousands more fish have been captured in more than 30 REEF-organized lionfish collection trips across the Caribbean.

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary protects 2,900 square nautical miles of critical marine habitat, including coral reef, hard bottom, sea grass meadows, mangrove communities and sand flats. NOAA and the state of Florida manage the sanctuary.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Visit us at <http://www.noaa.gov> or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/usnoaagov>.

###