

## PRESS RELEASE

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Volunteers Make a Dive That Counts!**

Throughout the month of July, divers and snorkelers will dive into our oceans to survey fish for the Great Annual Fish Count. Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) coordinates the Great Annual Fish Count along the support from NOAA's National Marine Sanctuaries Program.

The GAFC began in 1992 when a small group of recreational divers and marine biologists conducted a visual fish count in the Channel Islands National Park. The effort was modeled after the Audubon's Christmas Bird Count and has grown into an international event.

The GAFC serves to introduce and inspire recreational divers and snorkelers to participate in year round volunteer fish monitoring programs, raise awareness among both the diving community and the public at large regarding marine environments and trends in fish populations, and provide researchers, marine resource managers and policy makers with valuable information when making decisions regarding our marine resources.

Throughout all the US, Caribbean, Gulf of California, and Canada, divers and snorkelers are invited to attend free fish ID seminars during May, June and July to learn how to identify local fishes and conduct surveys. After training, divers and snorkelers will conduct fish surveys during the month of July as part of the Great Annual Fish Count event. Fish are surveyed using the roving diver technique. The goal is to find as many fish species as possible so divers are encouraged to look under ledges, and up in the water column. Any sea turtle species seen during your dive are also recorded. The fish counts are done by assigning each recorded species an abundance category based on about how many were seen throughout the dive [single (1); few (2-10), many (11-100), and abundant (>100)]. All that is necessary is an underwater slate, computer survey scan forms and a comprehensive fish identification book. Volunteers are encouraged to attend one of REEF's free fish ID seminars and to participate in a survey dive. A complete schedule of seminars and dive events are posted on the GAFC web site at [www.fishcount.org](http://www.fishcount.org).

Fish Survey kits, which include an underwater slate, UW paper, fish ID card, computer scan forms, REEF BC tag, GAFC sticker and survey instructions will be available along with the official GAFC-T-Shirt. All survey participants will be entered into a drawing to win a grand prize and regional prizes. The grand prize is a weeklong dive/accommodation package at Hawk's Nest Resort and Marina, in Cat Island, Bahamas. So come on and join the fun. Participate in the Great Annual Fish Count and Make a Dive That Counts!

To register for a seminar or dive, register online at [www.fishcount.org](http://www.fishcount.org), e-mail [GAFC@reef.org](mailto:GAFC@reef.org), or call Alex Score, GAFC Coordinator at 305-852-0030.

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# Background on the Great Annual Fish Count

## Introduction

The health of our planet depends on the well being of our oceans. Regrettably, marine habitats around the world are in decline and many are threatened because of ever increasing human impacts. However, the oceans remain one of the last frontiers to be extensively explored. The spectacular coral reefs and other marine habitats renowned for their rich biodiversity and attracting millions of visitors each year, are only beginning to be understood.

Recreational divers and snorkelers are in a unique position to learn about and contribute much needed data for resource managers to make informed decisions regarding our many vulnerable marine habitats and their resources. Armed with the knowledge, training and opportunity to become involved, these concerned citizens can make significant and ongoing contributions to improve marine life.

Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) is a non-profit organization that encourages volunteer divers and snorkelers to perform underwater fish identification and surveys. REEF educates and enables divers and non-divers alike to become active stewards in the conservation of coral reefs and other marine habitats.

Coordinated by REEF with support from the US National Marine Sanctuary Program, the Great Annual Fish Count (GAFC) mobilizes and trains volunteer divers and snorkelers in established methodologies to identify and document fish diversity and population trends in marine sanctuaries and coastal areas.

GAFC educates and raises awareness about fish populations and the marine environment, generates information regarding trends in fish populations and encourages the participation and involvement of divers and snorkelers in ongoing fish monitoring.

## **Background**

The Great American Fish Count (GAFC) was started in 1992 by Dr. Gary Davis at the Channel Islands National Park (CINP) as a way to encourage sport divers to report fish sightings. Fifty divers participated in the first GAFC at Anacapa Island. The primary goals of the GAFC were to: a) raise public awareness about trends in fish populations, b) provide information on fish populations, c) provide a sustainable non-extractive diving activity, and d) improve fish population assessment techniques. Their efforts were modeled after the Audubon Christmas Bird Count, and quickly grew into an annual event. The event was focused around a discrete time frame in July in order to get as many divers as possible involved and attract media attention. The hope was to have divers become interested enough in fish monitoring to map and adopt sites that could then be visited year-round.

Volunteers go out during the GAFC event and conduct fish surveys. A standardized visual census method is used in order to obtain useful and valid information. The method

allows for unrestricted movement throughout the dive site and requires minimal effort and equipment. Divers record all species encountered that can be positively identified along with the species relative abundance. At the conclusion of the dive or snorkel, each volunteer diver transfers their sightings onto a preprinted scan form, which is then returned to REEF to be entered into REEF's database. This database is available to all who are interested including, scientists, educators, marine resource managers and other conservation bodies.

## **The GAFC Today**

In celebration of the 10 year anniversary and the expansion of the event, in 2002, the name was officially changed to the Great Annual Fish Count. GAFC is an annual event held each July. Leading up to the event, free seminars are given to dive clubs and to anyone that is interested in doing volunteer fish surveys. These seminars are approximately two hours long and basic fish ID/fish surveying techniques are taught which would enable participants to identify the most common species found in their local waters. Once the seminars are completed, follow up dives can be done anytime within the month of July as part of the GAFC celebration. The identification techniques learned can then be used to carry out year round fish surveys which are not only educational and informative, but also lots of fun.

GAFC Seminars are free of charge, but it is suggested that you register to attend. Student REEF Starter kits will be available at a minimal cost that includes an underwater slate, color fish ID card or fish-in-a-pocket book, underwater paper, survey scan forms and directions, REEF BC tag and GAFC sticker. Official GAFC T-shirts will also be available.

GAFC seminars and dives are held all over the country providing many opportunities for people to volunteer and become involved. Divers are needed to conduct fish counts during July. These divers don't need to be experts in fish identification, but they do need to know the basics. Training seminars offer volunteers the opportunity to learn fish identification skills and the census method. Help is needed to conduct these training seminars. A standard curriculum is available. Groups are also needed to organize survey teams and dive trips. To obtain information on currently scheduled seminars and dives, visit the fishcount website at: [www.fishcount.org](http://www.fishcount.org).

## **Registration Information**

Registering for the GAFC event is easy. There are several ways to register: 1) Send an email to [GAFC@reef.org](mailto:GAFC@reef.org) and indicate the seminar you wish to attend, name of participant, phone number, email address and mailing address. 2) Sign up with the local sponsor or you may also contact Alex Score (GAFC Coordinator) at [gafc@reef.org](mailto:gafc@reef.org), 305-852-0030 or write REEF headquarters, P.O. Box 246, Key Largo, FL 33037.

## **What People Say About REEF and the Great Annual Fish Count**

“Volunteer divers and snorkelers participating in the Great Annual Fish Count provide National Marine Sanctuary managers with valuable data on fish populations, which can help lead to more effective protection. Here in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, volunteers play an integral role in the Sanctuary’s monitoring program by collecting data on fish populations in no-take areas and fished sites.” - Billy Causey, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Superintendent

“Participation in REEF’s survey program enhances a diver’s ability to discern details about the marine environment. For divers that have no training as naturalists, areas begin to blend together and the attitude that “it’s just another coral reef” or “one more kelp forest” prevails. The excitement of finding a rare fish can only be appreciated if one knows it’s rare. By learning identification techniques and recording their fish observations, REEF surveyors become keen observers, true naturalists”- Dr. Christy Pattengill-Semmens, REEF Scientific Coordinator

“While the July count is the marquee event of REEF’s mission, most people do not realize that the count continues year-round. People say they have heard about it but don’t know a lot about it. A lot of times they’re not sure how to get involved. They think it lasts a week or two and then it’s over.” - Julie Dutcher, 2001 GAFC Coordinator

“Fishwatching is a passionate hobby within a hobby; it gives purpose to a dive, anyone can take it up and have a good time.” – Paul Humann, Marine Life Photographer and Co-Founder of REEF

“We realize that we do not have the resources to conduct all the monitoring needed in the Sanctuary program, and we rely on REEF volunteers to fill in some of the gaps.” - Dr. Steve Gittings, NOAA National Marine Sanctuary Program Science Coordinator

"In the development of the methods and techniques used for REEF fish surveys, REEF and its founders have exhibited enormous vision by pioneering in the ocean the kind of conservation ethic that terrestrial naturalists have demonstrated for over a century." Billy Causey, Superintendent Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary