



2026 Florida Keys Lionfish Derby
Reef Environmental Education Foundation

April 23 – 26, 2026

OFFICIAL DERBY RULES

1. LIONFISH (*Pterois volitans/miles complex*) ELIGIBLE FOR ENTRY, MAY ONLY BE TAKEN DURING THE DERBY. NO PREVIOUSLY CAUGHT OR FROZEN LIONFISH WILL BE ALLOWED. **PLEASE KEEP ALL LIONFISH ON ICE.**
2. REEF reserves the right to keep 20% of lionfish presented at drop-off, for uses including "lionfish tasting," education, research, and market development.
3. Teams can take back up to 80% of their catch after measuring to do what they like with it or donate it to REEF to use for education and outreach opportunities. Teams will need a FWC Salt Water Products license to sell the catch and will be responsible for obtaining the permit and the sale of the fish themselves.
4. **CAPTAINS MEETING:** The Captain's Meeting will be at **6:30PM-7:30PM Thursday, April 23, 2026**. Location TBA. A team captain must attend the Captain's meeting and be one of the four participants in the derby, but does not need to be the captain of the boat. Safe collecting and handling techniques and derby rules will be reviewed. **IMPORTANT:** We are allowing remote attendance of the Captain's Meeting via ZOOM (details will be emailed out following your registration).
5. **PERMITS** - Teams that want to use the special permits provided for the derby **MUST** attend the captains meeting in person or schedule a time to go to REEF HQ to receive instructions, pick up a permit and tournament flag to fish in those special zones and must carry those permits and flag on board their vessel while fishing in permitted zones. Email lionfish@REEF.org for additional information or to request a permit. Additional information regarding available permits will be shared with teams following registration.
6. **TEAM DIVISIONS:** Teams awarded first place in the Reef Defenders Category in the previous three (3) years must register under the Apex Predator category.
7. **Borrowed lionfish equipment**, as well as permits and derby shirts can be picked up before the Captain's meeting starting at 6:30 PM **Thursday, April 23, 2026**. All borrowed equipment must be returned to the REEF Campus by 3:30PM Sunday, April 26, 2026.
8. **WAIVERS:** Every team member must sign the Diving Participant Lionfish Understanding of Risk Form Online. If a team member does not sign the form online prior to the Captain's Meeting, the team member will not be considered eligible for the derby, even if registration fees were paid. All waivers can be accessed on our website here: [REEF Lionfish Waivers](#).
9. Only legal means of capture in areas allowing use of certain gear types will be allowed. All existing federal, state, and local laws must be followed. State and Federal laws will be strictly enforced. All permits given to team prior to the Captain's Meeting must be present on vessels while participating in this derby.
10. During this two-day (Friday and Saturday) fishing event lionfish may be taken by pole spear with paralyzer tip, hand net or hook and line. No chemicals, traps or other collecting mechanisms are allowed.
11. Lionfish may be taken from any waters in the invaded region as long as the collection occurs during Derby hours and the fish are present at the drop-off by **12:30PM Sunday April 26, 2026**. Teams must report the location where the lionfish were removed from on their datasheet.
12. All existing federal, state, and local laws must be followed. Laws and regulations will be strictly enforced.
13. Teams will be limited to between 2-4 persons. To qualify for prizes, participants must be registered and show proper identification.
14. Non-refundable registration fees are \$120 per team and must be paid by **April 23, 2026 6:00PM** (\$90 early bird registration through March 20, 2026).
15. Protective gloves should be worn when handling lionfish. Participants are encouraged to carry a heat pack or thermos bottle on the boat containing hot, but not scalding, water for first aid purposes. REEF is not responsible for any lionfish stings that may occur.
16. **Derby Fishing hours:** Sunrise until Sunset, Friday, **April 24, 2026**, Sunrise until Sunset, Saturday, **April 25, 2026**. All fish must be present at drop-off location by **12:30PM Sunday, April 26, 2026**.
17. Coolers must be properly labelled with captain or team names and must contain enough ice to keep lionfish cold for as long as they are held at drop-off station. Completed datasheet must be dropped at final check-in.
18. **Drop Locations & Times: Sunday April 26, 2026.** REEF Campus 98300 Overseas Hwy Key Largo, FL 33037 8:30AM to 12:30PM. Teams can contact lionfish@REEF.org if they wish to drop fish Saturday **April 25**.
19. **AWARD CEREMONY:** Prizes will be awarded in 1st, 2nd, 3rd place for most lionfish, the largest and smallest lionfish and Golden Fish Award, and smallest live fish at the awards ceremony at REEF Campus at **3:30PM**

Sunday April 26, 2026. Awards will also be live streamed. **Teams will have to attend awards to win.** Prizes will not be shipped.

20. Only one winning entry per team will be allowed in each category (no sweeping of a category).
21. If not enough entries are received in any category for the number of prizes remaining, the awards will be left as unclaimed.
22. During registration, teams must choose to compete in one of two Divisions for the Most Lionfish Category
 - Apex Predators Division (More Competitive Division; Greater Prize Money)
 - Reef Defenders Division (More Casual Division; Lower Prize Money)
22. The Golden Fish Award will be run as a raffle. All officially entered teams are eligible. Each team checking in at the scoring station by **12:30PM Sunday, April 26** will be issued 1 ticket and then for every additional 50 fish brought in they will receive another ticket, for a \$500 cash drawing occurring at the awards ceremony.
23. Minimum Prize table (may increase with sponsorship and registration)

Derby Prize Category	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Most-Apex Predators Division	\$1200	\$800	\$500	\$350	\$250	\$150
Most-Reef Defenders Division	\$600	\$300	\$200	\$100		
Largest Lionfish - All Teams	\$500	\$250	\$150			
Smallest Lionfish - All Teams	\$500	\$250	\$150			
Smallest Live Lionfish - All	\$50					



Golden Fish Award - \$500 Raffle

Each team that drops off their datasheet will be entered to win;

Every 50 fish a team catches gets them an additional raffle ticket entry.

24. Final Prizes may change based on registration. If there are not at least three teams registered in each division the two divisions will be combined. All teams will compete together for Largest and Smallest lionfish categories.
25. All lionfish must be in whole condition (no missing heads or tails). Largest and smallest fish will be determined by total length of the fish, in millimeters, measuring from tip of snout to tip of tail by Derby Officials.
26. All entrants agree to allow Derby officials, REEF, FL DEP and the FKNMS to take and use photos for media and promotional purposes.
27. The Derby takes place regardless of weather conditions. Captains are responsible for the safety of themselves and their crew and make their own decision about whether to venture out.
28. In the event of a tie for any category level, prize money will be split between teams (the prize level below will be combined with the tied level (ie, 2nd and 3rd place) when applicable). Non-monetary prizes will be given out to participants on the teams through a drawing.
29. All cash prizes will be awarded to Team Captain by bank check.
30. Winning participants will need to submit a prize form and W9 form prior to receiving prize money greater than \$600. The Derby Officials will be available to split the team's purse to their needs as long as they provide a valid W-9 form for each recipient and return the disbursement form. Prize money will be awarded by bank check.
31. The Lionfish Derby is an honor system tournament with the captain being responsible for team compliance with the Rules.
32. Anyone found violating Derby Rules by the Derby Officials will be disqualified from receiving any Derby prizes and prohibited from entry in any future REEF derbies.
33. **Decisions of the derby officials are final.**