



REEF/Contributed

The venomous spines of the Indo-Pacific lionfish requires harvesters to take added precaution when spearing them, including wearing protective gloves and using a collection bag.

Taming the lionfish

BY JOSH GORE
Free Press Staff

KEY LARGO — After invading offshore reefs and near-shore waters and upsetting the natural order of things, the exotic lionfish has made its way to dinner plates with a blessing from local regulators. In fact, a tournament this weekend awards those who harvest the most.

Rules, though, differ on where to take the fish and which permits a diver needs to collect the tasty predator.

In state waters, there are no bag or size limits for lionfish. There is also no requirement to have a recreational fish-

ing license if harvesters are using such gear as nets, pole spears or spears designed specifically for lionfish, according to Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission spokeswoman Carli Segelson.

Spearing, though, is not allowed in all areas, she added.

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary waters are a bit different. As long as lionfish harvesters are diving in areas where fishing is already allowed, no permit is needed. Targeting lionfish in a Sanctuary Preservation Area, however, requires a permit. And catching lionfish there is only allowed by hand net or

slurp gun.

Permits can be obtained by attending a workshop through the sanctuary or the Reef Environmental Education Foundation. REEF, based at mile marker 98, is organizing the lionfish derby set for Saturday, Sept. 14, at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.

REEF Program Manager Keri Kenning describes the Indo-Pacific invader as a voracious fish devouring more than 70 known species. The fish employs 18 venomous spines to keep predators away.

“Though lionfish may seem

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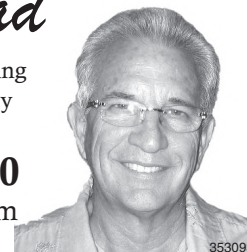
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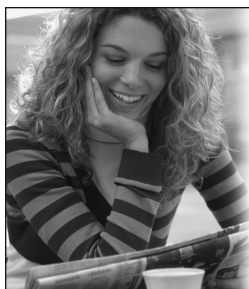
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Fri. - Fish Fry All Day! Entertainment by Ted & Vivian 6:30pm

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Lionfish

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unstoppable, divers can significantly reduce local populations, and local control is proving to be highly successful," Kenning said.

Over the last year, a number of Florida Keys restaurants have added lionfish to their menus. At the Fish House Encore in Key Largo, it has become a mainstay on the menu.

Whenever harvesting lionfish, experts recommend using protective gloves, spears, hand nets and collection bags, which are available at local dive shops. When hunting for the fish, it is best to check in caves and crevices.

Tourists or locals interested in a more guided lionfish experience can go out on a dive or snorkel boat. Many dive boat operations in the Upper Keys are part of a Blue Star program that allows them to take customers on lionfish hunting trips.

Competitors in Saturday's derby will be able to spear for lionfish in the state park for the first time. Spearfishing gear will be restricted to pole spears with paralyzer tips, and teams will be required to fly special lionfish pennants during the derby.

The rules will be covered during a captains' meeting at



REEF/Contributed

Lionfish derbies, above, and adding the exotic fish to restaurant menus are two methods being used to slow down the species growth in local waters.

6:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 13, at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, mile marker 102.5, oceanside.

During last year's derby, competitor's harvested 461 lionfish. This year's event is the fourth annual REEF derby.

Similar lionfish tournaments are held in Fort Lauderdale and the Bahamas.

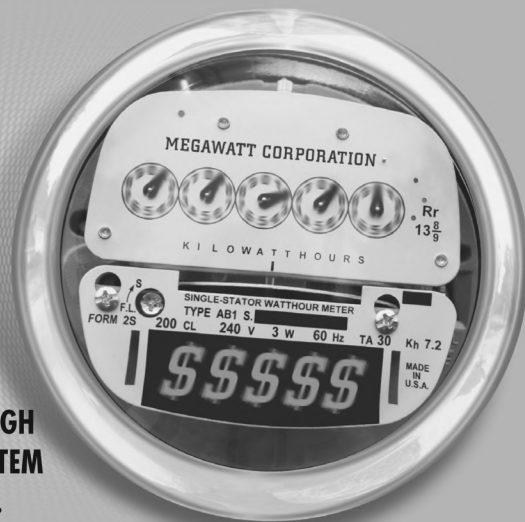
Those interested in participating may register online at www.REEF.org/lionfish/derbies.

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