

EARTH IS
BLUE

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SANCTUARIES

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JOURNEY

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SCIENCE

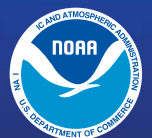
BLUE STAR
FOR THE
OCEAN

MAGAZINE OF THE

NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES



NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARIES



NATIONAL OCEANOGRAPHIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
NOAA
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

REEF's first surveys through the Volunteer Fish Survey Project took place in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Photo: Matt McIntosh/NOAA

PARTNERS THAT COUNT

Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF)

— By AMY LEE

In July 1993 in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, a small group of pioneering conservationists conducted the first surveys as part of REEF's Volunteer Fish Survey Project. Today, the project represents the world's largest marine life database. It contains more than 233,000 surveys conducted by volunteer divers and snorkelers worldwide, including nearly 40,000 surveys from all national marine sanctuaries except Thunder Bay.

By conducting surveys, recreational divers and snorkelers learn about and develop an appreciation for the marine life found in our national marine sanctuaries, while making a meaningful contribution to the marine science community. The

information collected by these volunteers serves as a baseline of biodiversity trends while documenting changes in the marine environment, such as non-native species, range shifts, and declines in species with commercial or ecological importance. Over 65 scientific publications have included the citizen science data from the Volunteer Fish Survey Project.

"I consider REEF's survey technique to be one of the best for assessing fish diversity and relative abundances, and detecting and tracking invasive species," says Dr. Steve Gittings, chief scientist for NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. "The technique also engages high quality, trained members of the public in sanctu-

ary characterization and monitoring."

REEF data are collected year-round, but as summer water temperatures increase, so do fish counting efforts. Each July, REEF coordinates the Great Annual Fish Count in partnership with national marine sanctuaries. Originally called the "Great American Fish Count," this event was first held in 1992, as a "fish census" in Channel Islands National Park. It officially became part of REEF in 1997 when the Volunteer Fish Survey Project expanded to the Pacific Ocean.

Similar to the Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count, the goal of the Great Annual Fish Count is to engage divers and snorkelers in citizen



Clockwise from top: REEF surveyors pause for a photo in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary; A citizen scientist counts fish in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary; A surveyor notes data in Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. Photos: Daryl Duda; Paul Humann; Janna Nichols

science. For divers and snorkelers who want to make a difference, it's the perfect opportunity to collect valuable data about our national marine sanctuaries that would not be available otherwise.

"We are proud to support REEF surveying in all ocean-based national marine sanctuaries, providing a unifying volunteer opportunity for sanctuary visitors," says Dr. Christy Patten-gill-Semmens, REEF director of science. "Our partnership with the sanctuaries is a valued part of our 25-year history, from our beginnings in the Florida Keys, to our collaboration with National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa to bring the Volunteer Fish Survey Project to the South

Pacific, and everywhere in between. The project provides a concerted and persistent data collection effort that generates information vital to effective environmental conservation, protection, and restoration."

Anyone can participate in the Great Annual Fish Count by joining or hosting fish identification classes, survey dives, or post-dive celebratory cookouts. Events are organized annually in nearly all national marine sanctuaries. To find one in a national marine sanctuary near you, visit www.fishcount.org, and check out www.REEF.org for more information and data summaries.

Amy Lee is the trips program and communications manager for REEF.

