



FLORIDA KEYS REGIONS ▾ KEYS VOICES TOPICS ▾ ABOUT HOME

Steward of the Keys: REEF’s Jill Kuehnert Brings New Ocean Exploration Center to Life with Purpose and Passion

By Laura Myers | June 2, 2025

FLORIDA KEYS REGIONS

- Key Largo
- Islamorada
- Marathon
- Big Pine Key & the Lower Keys
- Key West

TRENDING

KEYS VOICES TOPICS

- Animal Ambassadors
- Arts
- Connect & Protect
- Environment
- Events
- Festivals
- Food
- Highlights
- History
- LGBTQ
- Local Color
- On the Water
- Profiles
- Quirks
- Restaurant Picks
- Senior Adventures
- Stewards of the Keys

[Keys Voices Main Archive](#)**KEYS VOICES ARCHIVES**

Select Month



As REEF's campus director in Key Largo, Jill Kuehnert blends science, outreach, and passion to inspire the next generation of ocean stewards and reef protectors. (Photo courtesy of Jill Kuehnert)

Jill Kuehnert, the campus director of Key Largo-based Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF), is a self-described “fish nerd wannabe.” She’s so passionate about fish that whenever she scuba dives, she tracks, counts and documents them to assist with the preservation and conservation of species.

“Fish nerds are like bird watchers,” Kuehnert said. “Once you get started you can’t stop.”

Eighteen months ago, Kuehnert dived right in to oversee the administration of REEF's Key Largo campus. The expanded facility includes its all-new two-story \$6 million, 4,000-square foot REEF Ocean Exploration Center for Marine Conservation.

Set for unveiling on June 7-8 to coincide with World Ocean Day, the new attraction is open to the public, six days a week, free of charge. And according to the foundation's officials, it marks a major milestone in the foundation's commitment to educate and inspire.



Jill Kuehnert and the REEF team engage with the public at a community outreach event, sharing their passion for marine conservation and inspiring ocean stewardship throughout the Florida Keys. (Photo courtesy of Jill Kuehnert)

"The Ocean Exploration Center represents a new chapter for REEF, aiming to provide an interactive and immersive experience for visitors and Keys residents," said Marta Bonatz, chair of REEF's board of trustees. She's equally impressed with the outreach Kuehnert has done to amplify the importance of marine life.

"Jill's skills in public speaking and community outreach, coupled with her steadfast and patient demeanor make her an ideal representative as we reach a broader audience," Bonatz explained. "This allows us to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the marine environment among

residents and visitors to the Florida Keys."

REEF's expanded facility features a contemporary, state-of-the-art ocean exploration gallery, a floor-to-ceiling centerpiece with colorful life-size molds of various Keys fish, works by rotating local artists and a science discovery classroom. The venue also serves as a meeting space and can host small groups and meetings. Kuehnert believes this offers the perfect platform to engage with all things marine.

"It's a unique opportunity for people to learn about our reef with an emphasis on fish," Kuehnert said.

REEF's key mission — facilitating programs that actively involve divers, snorkelers and reef enthusiasts in marine conservation — is accomplished in part through its Volunteer Fish Survey Project, producing one of the world's largest marine life databases.

The 'citizen science' project, launched in 1993, has surpassed more than 300,000 surveys, conducted by 17,000 global volunteer divers and snorkelers at nearly 18,000 world ocean sites. Kuehnert has conducted more than 30 surveys.

REEF also organizes a wide range of field survey trips. This year, upcoming dive trips include prime destinations like Roatan, Honduras; Fernando de Noronha, Brazil; El Hierro, Canary Islands, Spain; South Sulawesi, Indonesia; Anilao, Philippines; Curacao, Cozumel, Mexico; and Cayman Brac, Cayman Islands.

Welcoming visitors to the Florida Keys, while supporting marine conservation efforts throughout the globe, takes a team of dedicated professionals. That's why REEF supports more than a dozen staff, fellows and interns.

Kuehnert loves the ocean, diving and marine life even though she grew up in land-locked Georgia. She grew up in Atlanta and graduated from American University in Washington, D.C., earning an undergraduate degree



REEF campus director Jill Kuehnert surveys reef fish during a dive off Key Largo. She has completed more than 30 surveys as part of REEF's Volunteer Fish Survey Project,

in international relations with a focus on Europe, and a master's degree in philosophy and social policy, focusing on environmental ethics. which helps build one of the largest marine life databases in the world.

Her post-college career began at World Bank Group in Washington, D.C., conducting agricultural outreach in Asia and Africa.

For a decade, she worked in Singapore as the regional Asia-Pacific head of government and public affairs for Monsanto Co., the former global producer of agricultural, biochemical and chemical products. From 2007 to 2023, Jill worked as a science communications consultant for public sector agriculture research projects.

It was at a party in Singapore that she met future husband Glenn Wright, a dive master hailing from South Africa. The two bonded in a discussion about scuba diving; at the time, however, Kuehnert was not yet a diver.

After deciding to move to South Florida, the couple founded and operated a custom dive business called Lucky Fish Scuba, for five years in Key Largo.

"We had just as much fun taking people to snorkel in the mangroves and bayside sunsets as we did out to the reef," she recalled.

Kuehnert recently wrapped up a three-year term as president of the Upper Keys Business and Professional Women (BPW), growing the group to become Florida's largest chapter with more than 100 members. And it's her tenacious spirit that has colleagues singing her praises.

"Jill turns vision into vibrant reality. Her insight, warmth and can-do spirit make her the friend, leader, and community champion everyone hopes to have by their side," said Key Largo resident Bonnie Barnes, the Upper Keys BPW's new president-elect and Monroe County program manager for Florida International University's Small Business Development Center.

"Jill is a natural leader who leads by example, with integrity and quiet strength," said Suzi Youngberg, president of the Key Largo Chamber of Commerce.

"She's not one to do anything halfway — when she commits to something, she gives it her all," Youngberg added. "Jill also has a gentle, encouraging way of helping build a community of people who care just as deeply as she does."

In the Florida Keys, REEF oversees a variety of events including the annual REEF Fest, slated for Thursday, October 16 to Sunday, October 19; and the Florida Keys Lionfish Derby & Arts Festival, held annually in April.

Keys Traveler (KT): *When did you first come to the Florida Keys and why?*

Jill Kuehnert: As a tourist and visiting once a decade: in the '80s, '90s and 2000s. In 2017, I moved to Key Largo with my husband Glenn. After living in Singapore, we wanted to live somewhere we could dive (and be warm) year-round. At first, we settled in Fort Lauderdale, but realized we wanted to be closer to the reef.

KT: *What aspects of the Keys' environment or way of life matter most to you?*

JK: I love the water on both sides: ocean and bay. What matters most to me is the community. I haven't lived in any other small towns or rural areas, and it took some time to adjust! But now I love running into people everywhere I go like at community events to raise awareness and build support for environmental issues, or in our social clubs and organizations.

KT: *What inspired you to become passionate about protecting the Keys' natural world and how does that passion impact your daily life and work?*

JK: As a dive operator bringing people out on their first snorkel or scuba diving experience, I wanted to make sure that what they saw inspired them to come back — and ultimately to be advocates for protecting the environment here in the Keys and elsewhere. Joining REEF as a member, and then on staff, felt like a natural progression to reach more visitors and locals with opportunities to learn and take part in activities that preserve our marine ecosystems.

KT: *How do you personally work to 'connect and protect' the Keys' environment and the island chain's unique lifestyle?*

JK: I put a lot of emphasis on the 'connect' part. REEF's mission fits so well with the work of other conservation and education organizations, as well as those involved in tourism. I have completed more than 30 surveys taking note of the species of fish that I see during my dives as part of the Volunteer Fish Survey Project. On my last dive at Elbow Reef, I found the cutest juvenile high-hat, a tiny fish no bigger than my thumbnail.

KT: *What do you hope your environmental actions in the Keys will help to accomplish?*

JK: That my actions will stir up enthusiasm and encourage people to learn more about how amazing our environment is — and then to work together on practical actions they can take to protect our shared environment.

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