

AN OCEAN OF WONDERS



REEF/CONTRIBUTED

The REEF Ocean Exploration Center, located just north of the Reef Environmental Education Foundation's longtime headquarters in the median at mile marker 98.3, held a ribbon-cutting ceremony June 7.

REEF center opens in Key Largo

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KEY LARGO — The grand opening of the REEF Ocean Exploration Center June 6-8 generated a weekend of celebration and fun for the community.

Located just north of the Reef Environmental Education Foundation's longtime headquarters in the

U.S. 1 median at mile marker 98.3, the new \$6 million center held a ribbon-cutting ceremony June 7 offering hands-on activities with ocean-themed exhibits and games, interactive tours, food trucks and free lionfish dip tasting.

Colorful videos of underwater imagery shared the delights of exploring the sea, and interactive opportunities gave all ages



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Mead Krówka, REEF education coordinator since 2024, filleted a lionfish and shared information about the numerous eggs they carry during the new REEF center's grand opening.

upper keys news



PHOTOS BY JILL ZIMA BORSKI/CONTRIBUTED

A mother and daughter explore items under a microscope in one of the many hands-on exhibit stations.



REEF 3-D displays make visitors feel as if they are underwater.

Ocean/from A1

the chance to learn more about the Florida Keys' backyard — the ocean. June 8 was World Ocean Day.

Some of the information was daunting and perhaps meant to spur action. A display about the Goliath grouper fishery showed its decline over the decades. A caption alongside a photograph of the largest Goliath grouper caught in Florida on May 20, 1961, off Fernandina Beach said it weighed 680 pounds and measured 7 feet, 1.5 inches. About 30 years later, the

center's information placards said such massive groupers were gone.

In 1990, Goliath groupers became protected from harvest in U.S. waters, though Florida recently reinstated a limited recreational harvest from March 1 to May 31 with bag and slot limits. The Caribbean also adopted protections in 1993 after the species was nearly wiped out due to overfishing. The goal was to allow the population to recover.

On the other end of the spectrum was a

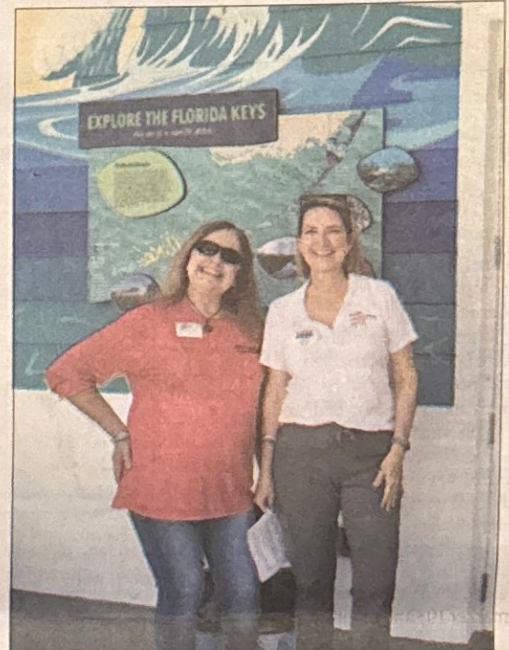
presentation about the invasive lionfish and visitors were encouraged to catch and eat as many as possible. Mead Krówka, REEF education coordinator since 2024, filleted a 7-inch female lionfish and shared information about its numerous eggs. The fish had two egg sacs. A female lionfish can have between 2,000 and 15,000 eggs in one egg sac, Krowka said. By 2009, lionfish, which have 18 venomous spines, were well-established along the Atlantic coast and throughout the Caribbean,

at times outcompeting or feasting upon native species.

The first confirmed lionfish sighting in the Keys was Jan. 6, 2009, near Key Largo. The rapid spread of lionfish in the Keys from 2009 to 2011 was documented through increased frequency of occurrence, abundance and biomass.

Many displays are interactive and geared toward students, such as a fish survey that involves identifying various species found on a reef replica and looking into microscopes to identify various bones and fossils.

REEF also offers on-site and virtual field trips. Sessions are adaptable and can be taught in-person at the REEF campus, off-site in the field or entirely online in a virtual format. REEF scientists guide students, allowing for minimal preparation by the teacher, said its website. The virtual field trips curriculum follows the 5E lesson structure of engagement, exploration, explanation, elaboration and evaluation.



Jill Kuehnert, right, REEF campus director, and Suzi Youngberg, president of Key Largo Chamber of Commerce, stand before the entry map describing the only coral reef in the continental United States.

The two-story, 4,000-square-foot Ocean Exploration Center is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday through Monday, noon to 8 p.m. Tuesday and 10 a.m.

to 5 p.m. Wednesday. Admission is free. For more information, visit reef.org or call 305-852-0030.

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