

NEW OCEAN EXPLORATION CENTER OPENS IN KEY LARGO

By **Jim McCarthy** - June 13, 2025



REEF co-executive directors Christy Pattengill-Semmens, left, and Martha Klitzkie cut the ribbon to celebrate the Ocean Reef Exploration Center's opening on June 7. MANUELA C. MOBLEY/Contributed

World Ocean Day was a bit more meaningful in Key Largo on June 7, as Reef Environment Education Foundation unveiled a state-of-the-art Ocean Exploration Center to the public.

Located next to REEF headquarters at MM 98.3, the ribbon-cutting of a new 4,000-square-foot, two-story facility among staff, local dignitaries and ocean aficionados marked a new era of marine science, conservation and education in the Florida Keys.

Before the grand opening, a small group got a sneak peek of the new center on June 5. Jill Kuehnert, REEF campus director, said the Ocean Exploration Center is a "wonderful addition."



“Whether we’re newcomers to the community or you’ve been here for a while, we know how multifaceted this place is to us,” she said. “Yes, it’s the ocean and it’s the fish, but it’s also culture, history and art. We want this center to give everyone who’s either a resident or a visitor coming up and down U.S. 1 to have a taste of what it means to be a part of this community.”

When entering, visitors are met with three large displays of a healthy, living Florida coral reef containing various species of 3D-printed fish. Explorers of all ages can gravitate to interactive displays featuring REEF’s volunteer fish survey project — a cornerstone to what founders Paul Humann and Ned DeLoach set out to achieve.

Visitors can also learn about the efforts to combat the invasive lionfish and protect the goliath grouper. A section also pays homage to volunteer citizen scientists who assist in REEF’s mission to conserve marine environments.

On the second floor, visitors are met with stunning sculptures of the Nassau grouper. Since 2002, REEF and the Cayman Islands have partnered to monitor and study Nassau grouper spawning aggregations. Dubbed Grouper Moon project, visitors can observe and read efforts undertaken to study one of the last remaining and largest currently known spawning aggregations for the endangered Nassau grouper.

During the visit, explorers young and old can attempt to locate 100 different fish species scattered throughout the center. Another interactive activity tests one's ability to line up the fish species from juvenile to adult. There's also room on the second floor to take a seat and enjoy the space and the colorful art on the walls.



Christy Pattengill-Semmens discusses the Grouper Moon project during a sneak peek of the center on June 5. JIM McCARTHY/Keys Weekly



Visitors walking into the new Ocean Exploration Center view a large display depicting a living Florida coral reef. JIM McCARTHY/Keys Weekly



3D-printed Nassau grouper hangs from the wall as visitors reach the second floor. JIM McCARTHY/Keys Weekly



Young explorers look through a microscope inside the new Ocean Exploration Center in Key Largo. REEF/Contributed

Martha Klitzke, co-executive director who oversees strategy and operations, said a lot of work went into preparing the center for visitors.



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"If you walked in here a few days ago, it looked like a construction site, though we're still that scrappy nonprofit that we always have been," she said. "We're excited at the

way that this will work for tourism ... but for also being a resource where people can gather and where students can get together and explore the ocean with more access. You don't have to be able to swim, you don't need access to a boat."

Christy Pattengill-Semmens, REEF co-executive director overseeing science and engagement, agreed with Klitzke regarding the center's completion.

"It was fast and furious right to the end," she said. "We wanted to build a place that felt welcoming to anyone. I feel like we've definitely achieved that."

Along with the interactive displays and exhibits, the Ocean Exploration Center features a classroom for visiting school groups to conduct activities. Pattengill-Semmens said REEF hosts hundreds of visitor groups each year, and the new facility will help increase capacity.

The center also features various art pieces as part of the "Ocean Inspires: Bridge Art Science and Humanity" platform for artists, poets, authors and creative minds who draw upon the ocean and other aspects of nature for inspiration and reflection. The exhibit encourages visitors to explore their personal connection to nature, reflect on the effects of climate change and shifting seas and consider how the ocean and open spaces have shaped human experience.

Admission to the Ocean Exploration Center is free, courtesy of REEF's "Oceans for All" initiative ensuring everyone can connect and join in protecting the ocean. More information is at reef.org/oec.



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Thanks to donors, REEF has raised 93% of the \$6 million needed to bring the Ocean Exploration Center to life. Now, a \$100,000 challenge grant from REEF members Byron and Sheila Bishop will match new donations and pledges made before June 30.



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**JIM MCCARTHY**

Jim McCarthy is one of the many who escaped the snow and frigid temperatures in Western New York. A former crime & court reporter and city editor for two Western New York newspapers, Jim has been honing his craft since he graduated from St. Bonaventure University in 2014. In his 5-plus years in the Keys, Jim has enjoyed connecting with the community. Jim is past president of the Key Largo Sunset Rotary Club. When he's not working, he's busy chasing his son, Lucas, around the house and enjoying time with family.

