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# On The Hunt Again for Lionfish

Sep 4, 2020



The beautiful lionfish, popular for aquariums, is native to the Indo-Pacific. As an invader, it depletes, and in some cases decimates, fish populations in our area and neighboring regions.

Hugh Hudson

Lionfish are miniscule compared to pythons, yet they have a common trait as an invasive species with no natural predators. Pythons relentlessly devour mammals, birds, even alligators, upsetting the ecological balance of the Everglades.

Lionfish are equally destructive to fish populations throughout the Caribbean and into the Atlantic Ocean. And as with pythons, human hunters become the solution. The Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) in Key Largo has been on the forefront of battling this voracious invader and in 2009, they added Lionfish Derbies to the fight.

As they explain on their website, "Ongoing research studies indicate that single day removal events can be highly effective in lowering the local lionfish population. For example, in the first ever lionfish derby in 2009,

participants removed 1,408 lionfish from Green Turtle Cay, Abaco, Bahamas."

As of the most recent count, more than 40,000 lionfish have been removed from REEF-supported derbies.

Despite disrupted schedules for 2020, the REEF staff has worked out a plan to hold a, "Socially-Distant Upper Keys Lionfish Derby", from Thursday, September 10 through Sunday, 13, 2020.

The goal as always is to remove as many fish as possible and cash prizes will once again be awarded in categories of "most, largest, and smallest lionfish".

Experienced and more novice hunters are welcome in the Apex Predator and Reef Defenders divisions. Teams of two to four in either or both categories can register on-line. The \$75 team fee is good through Sunday, September 6th and \$100 through September 10th.

Hunting can take place from sunrise to sunset on the Friday and Saturday, with final drop-off not later than 10:00 a.m., Sunday, Sept 13th at either the REEF Campus, 98300 Overseas Hwy, Key Largo or Mote Marine Laboratory, 24244 Overseas Highway, Summerland Key. The contactless drop-off stations will be staffed throughout the weekend.

A virtual mandatory Captains' Meeting will be held at 5:30 p.m., Thursday, September 10, 2020.

Although participants can collect lionfish by netting or spearing while diving,

snorkeling, or free diving, they must follow all federal and state fishing regulations as will be discussed. Proven techniques will also be covered because the toxin in lionfish spines can cause injury if not handled safely.

Participants may dive from private boats or charters. Rainbow Reef in Key Largo and Key Dives in Islamorada will run specific charters and other local dive centers may have arrangements as well. Individuals should book

directly with the dive centers for these charters. For more information about the derby and the on-going Invasive Species Program, visit <https://www.REEF.org/2020derby> [1] or call (305) 852-0030.

Among ways of engaging and teaching the community about lionfish is to promote them as a delicious treat, and the second edition of "The Lionfish Cookbook" is available through the REEF website. "It contains brand new recipes from highly regarded culinary professionals throughout the

Western Atlantic, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico, all of whom have created unique methods of preparing lionfish. The original 45 appetizer and entrée recipes from the first edition are included as well, providing a blend of tantalizing recipes, background and impacts of the lionfish invasion, and information on how to effectively catch, handle and prepare lionfish."