



2020 Upper Keys Lionfish Derby Sets New Records Despite Tropical Storm Interference

27 teams removed 1,321 lionfish in REEF's annual derby

By BECCA HURLEY 2 HOURS AGO

The 2020 Upper Keys Lionfish Derby resulted in 1,321 fewer invasive lionfish on the seafloor in the Florida Keys. Twenty-seven teams participated in the annual derby from September 10 to 13, with participants able to capture and spear lionfish on Friday and Saturday. All fish were required to be turned in by Sunday, September 13 at 10 am.

The 2020 derby set multiple event records, with the highest number of participants ever, snagging more lionfish than any other year.

In years past, the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF)-sponsored event featured a festival on the final day where participants gather to see teams awarded prizes for their reef-cleaning efforts. Due to COVID-19, event organizers at REEF opted for a virtual captain's meeting to kick-off the event and announced all awards over Facebook Live at the conclusion of the derby.

Local dive operator Rainbow Reef did not let the pandemic keep them from cleaning the reefs of this invasive species. The dive center donated an entire charter to REEF's efforts, allowing their staff

members the opportunity to join in on the derby. In two dives on Friday, September 11, the Rainbow Reef team captured approximately 38 lionfish.

“Conservation is an extremely cared about concept throughout the Keys,” says Maddie Cholnoky, Rainbow Reef’s conservation team lead. “We all support one another by participating in events such as this to help preserve and care for the marine environments we work in each day.”

Plans to dive again on Saturday were thwarted by the last-minute arrival of Tropical Storm Sally. Sally descended upon the Keys in the early morning hours on Saturday docking the Rainbow Reef team and the majority — if not all — charter and private boats for the day.

"The seas were *Perfect Storm* like. We made it out to the reef but it just didn't seem safe so we called it off before putting anyone in the water," said Alex Fogg, a dedicated lionfish hunter and member of the Florida Man team who competed on a private vessel. Despite losing a dive day, his team took home cash prizes for winning both the smallest lionfish category and the newly-created award for the smallest live lionfish.

Annual lionfish derbies help raise awareness about this invasive species and its impact to reefs in Florida, the Caribbean and Atlantic Oceans. “The event is a great way to collaborate with different organizations and divers to learn more about where the lionfish are impacting our reef,” says Ali Candelmo, Conservation Science Manager at REEF.

Each year REEF keeps around 20 percent of the fish for various research projects and the remaining fish are sent home with each team to eat or sell as they please.

Full results from the 2020 Upper Keys Lionfish Derby can be viewed at www.REEF.org/2020derby. REEF will host its 12th annual, 2021 Keys Lionfish Derby and Festival on September 12, 2021, at Postcard Inn Resort and Marina in Islamorada. For more information about REEF Lionfish Derbies, visit www.REEF.org/lionfish-derbies.

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