



# Florida Keys Lionfish Derby Winners Bring in Record-Breaking 426 Invasive Fish

60,000 lionfish in the region have been culled thanks to programming put on by REEF, the derby's nonprofit host.

By TIFFANY DUONG MAY 6, 2022

Local divers collected a record-setting 426 invasive lionfish during an Earth Day lionfish derby in the Florida Keys.

The Forever Young teammates Tony Young, Jason Vogan, Luke Rankin and Jeff Tharp dominated the annual 2022 Earth Day "Locals" Lionfish Derby. Wind kept other teams out of the water, allowing these dedicated divers to bring in a tournament-record 426 fish. The largest lionfish measured 425 mm, and the smallest was 102 mm. All were caught on scuba using a pole spear.

Native to the Indo-Pacific, these invasive are harmful to reefs and ocean biodiversity throughout the region because of their voracious appetites and prolific reproduction rates. They capable of clearing out all the small benthic fish that help coral reefs survive in a very short time and have no local predators. Left unchecked, lionfish cause dramatic declines to biodiversity and abundance of native fish populations.

"Regular removals and events like derbies have been found to significantly reduce lionfish populations at the local scale and engage communities to continue supporting the effort and management," says a press release from the the tournament's nonprofit host, the Key Largo-based REEF Environmental Education Foundation (REEF). "To date, more than 60,000 lionfish have been removed from REEF-supported derbies, outreach and research programs."

"One hundred percent, derbies work," tournament Tony Young tells Scuba Diving Magazine. "When we remove lionfish from a site, it will take a long time before they come back."

Several years ago, Young would easily shoot 30 to 50 lionfish in a single day's charter. Now 10 to 15 is a good day. The fish are also significantly smaller, which is a good sign that divers are able to catch them before they become adults, he says. On many popular dive sites in the Florida Keys, you often can't find any lionfish anymore. "This is all a huge success for the conservation and preservation of our reefs," Young says.

REEF will host the next Florida Keys Lionfish Derby & Festival on Sunday, September 11 at Postcard Inn Beach Resort & Marina in Islamorada. For more information, visit [REEF.org/derby](https://reef.org/derby).

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