

October is a month that bridges the residual warmth from September and the chilly conditions brought on by November. For many scuba divers, depending on locality, it marks the end of the busy dive season: transitioning into winter before the electrified energy of diving returns full swing in spring. Florida, with its consistently balmy and warm temperatures, both above and in the waters, is a lauded destination during these colder months. REEF Fest 2019 invites visitors of all ages to celebrate all things ocean from October 17 to 20, opening warm, watery worlds within southern Florida.

Managed by the Reef Environment Education Foundation (REEF), REEF Fest is a four-day exploration of marine environments and conditions throughout the Florida Keys. REEF Fest recognizes and honors successful education and marine conservation programs and initiatives, and includes a bevy of activities and events, including, according to its website, “educational seminars, social gatherings, diving and eco-adventures alongside some of the most prestigious names in diving and marine conservation.”

“One of the goals is to get REEF members and other ocean enthusiasts physically down to the Keys to participate in diving, snorkeling, and kayaking... to really appreciate the beauty of the Keys’ marine environment,” says REEF Trips Program and Communications Manager Amy Lee, “and hopefully get people engaged in our program and learn ways they can make a difference for conservation.”

“Individual empowerment. Spreading the message of what we do and why it’s important,” she continues. “And continued engagement with our members. Even though we are based in Key Largo, we have members from all over the world. A lot of them have not physically been to our headquarters... we try to offer an individualized level of communication... like a big family.”

REEF Fest celebrates the hard work and dedication of ocean stewards and scientists, along with the Keys community, which has made these efforts possible. A social event will be presented each day of the festivities, allowing guests and presenters a venue to mingle and discuss pertinent topics

concerning the ocean environment.

On Thursday, 17 REEF Fest will provide a sunset picnic, located at the Murray Nelson Government Center in Key Largo, with a welcome message and opening seminar to follow inside the center’s auditorium. The next evening features an open house at REEF HQ where celebrants can tour the building, enjoy the Native Plants Trail, and experience the Interpretive Center; complimentary appetizers and local beer and wine complement the occasion. The festival’s premiere social event, the For the Love of the Sea Banquet, starts Saturday evening next to Quiescence Diving Services, and offers a variety of appetizer, entrée, and beverage choices, live music, and a silent auction that benefits REEF’s marine conservation mission: an experience enhanced by the iconic southern Florida sunset. Each ticket for the banquet costs \$70. Lastly, REEF 2019 will come to a close with a farewell brunch late morning on Sunday,



**REEF FEST 2019 C
FLORIDA**

20: the final opportunity to meet and mingle before next year's festival.

Throughout the opening day, visitors will interact with REEF experts who will impart valuable teaching tools through three workshops: Lionfish Collecting and Handling Workshop, by Alli Candelmo, Ph.D., "Tropical Western Atlantic Fish ID for Beginner Surveyors", presented by REEF Outreach Coordinator Janna Nichols, and "Tropical Western Atlantic Fish ID for Intermediate/Advanced Surveyors", taught by Lee.

Cementing the festival's focus on reef and ocean environment conservation will be a series of engaging seminars hosted by luminaries in oceanography, scuba diving, marine biology, and other related subjects.

REEF Fest's opening evening features "The Future

for Sea Turtles on a Warming Planet", presented by Selina Heppel, Ph.D., Professor at Oregon State University. Friday afternoon, visitors can enjoy presentations "The Power of Marine Citizen Science", headlined by Ben Holt, Ph.D and Director of the Rock Pool Project; and "Reef Fish Behavior, 2nd Edition: Twenty joy-filled years in the making" by REEF trustees and co-founders Ned and Anna DeLoach. REEF Fest's seminar series concludes on Saturday afternoon with "Blooms of Blue-green Algae in South Florida: Ecological causes and human health consequences" by Larry Brand, Ph.D. Professor of Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, University of Miami; "Lionfish and Nassau Grouper: A tale of two fish and how stakeholder collaboration leads to conservation success" by Alli Candelmo, Ph.D. and REEF Director of Science and REEF Invasive Species Program Manager, and Christy Pattengill-Semmens, Ph.D.; and "Marine Heatwaves: What 5,000 citizen scientists can tell us about 85,000



CELEBRATES MARINE CONSERVATION DA KEYS COMMUNITY

ARTICLE BY JOHN TAPLEY; PHOTOS COURTESY REEF

beached birds”, presented by Julia Parrish, COASST Executive Director and Ph.D. Professor of the University of Washington.

Scuba divers interested in experiencing REEF’s mission up close and personal can join up with participating dive charters in the Upper Keys on Friday, October 18 and Saturday 19. Each expedition will include a REEF representative who will provide and cover fish identification materials. REEF Fest dive partners this year include Amy Slate’s Amora Dive Resort, Horizon Divers, Quiescence Diving Services, and Key Dives. On both days, Amy Slate’s Amora Dive Resort will offer opportunities for snorkelers; Florida Bay Outfitters Kayak Tour will provide three-hour guided kayak eco-tours with a focus on wading birds and nearshore marine life. Parties interested in these events should register with REEF directly. REEF Fest has been a mainstay program since its inaugural event in 2013, which coincided with REEF’s 25th anniversary.

“That event went so well that starting in 2015, we decided to make it an annual thing, [and] it was the first time we called it REEF Fest,” says Lee. “It’s been held annually since 2015, and something particularly exciting is this year’s event is the first year we have a title sponsor. We’re happy to have the support of Capital Bank Foundation.”

All REEF Fest events are open to the public though pre-registration is requested. For more details on REEF Fest, including registration and banquet tickets, visit www.reef.org/reeffest.





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