

# Sounding Line

News of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

Autumn 2000

## Personal Watercraft Issue Addressed by SAC

Lt. Cmdr. Dave Savage, NOAA Corps

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Final Management Plan defines a personal watercraft as "shallow-draft, jet drive watercraft on which the operator sits, kneels, or stands and excludes those vehicles piloted from inside the craft." In February 2000, members of the Sanctuary Advisory Council asked the Superintendent to establish a Personal Watercraft Working Group charged with formulating a plan to manage PWC usage in the Sanctuary. The group met twice to discuss the issue before recommending that a process be established to develop a workable strategy for alleviating user conflicts and environmental damage that may be occurring as a result of PWC usage. The process, which is in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, involves a series of working group meetings, public education forums, formal public meetings, and potential regulation changes. So far there have been two working group meetings and two public education forums.

The forums were held in Key Largo and Key West on July 11 and 12, respectively. The purpose of the forums was to expose concerned citizens of Monroe

County to both local and national PWC issues. Guest speakers included Officer Steve Acton, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; George Gar-

rett, Marine Resources Director for Monroe County; Sean Foertsch, Government Affairs Representative of the Personal Watercraft Industry Association; Sean Smith, President of the Bluewater Network; Rob Schutz, Public Affairs Representative for the Bombardier Corporation; Wayne Elliott, Chief Ranger of Biscayne National Park; Gary Yaworski, Owner of Island Watersports and Florida Keys Seadoo; and Amy Knowles, President of the Izaak Walton League Florida Keys Chapter. The forums were well attended by PWC owners, rental operators, and PWC industry representatives. The forums were not well attended by environmentalists, flats guides, and other stakeholders potentially opposed to PWC usage in the Florida Keys.



Personal Watercraft are the focus of the most recently formed SAC working group.

The next working group meeting, scheduled for late September, will lay the groundwork for determining the potential alternatives for dealing with the personal watercraft issue. In November, the Sanctuary will hold public hearings on the potential alternatives. Formal public comment on the alternatives will be taken at the November hearings. These comments will be considered to determine which alternatives to recommend to the Advisory Council.

These ranked alternatives will be presented to the Sanctuary Advisory Council after the working group has deliberated on them. Potential rulemaking and public notices will follow the Sanctuary Advisory Council's endorsement of the preferred alternative(s).

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# Message from the Superintendent



Dear Readers,

As the 2000 lobster mini-season has passed and the regular opening of the lobster season on August 6 is history, all of us locally can breathe a little easier for a short time. However, this year during the two-day lobster season, I was once again reminded of the wide range of problems and impacts that inexperienced and uninformed visitors bring to the Florida Keys each year. Several of the topics in this edition of *Sounding Line* focus on issues that Sanctuary staff are working on that result from activities that in some way conflict with our primary goal of protecting Sanctuary resources.

## Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

*Billy D. Causey*  
**Superintendent**

*Anna Marie Hartman*  
**State Co-trustee**

### Sanctuary Advisory Council

*Rob Bleser*  
Diving Upper Keys

*Wayne Blevins*  
Tourism Upper Keys

*John D. Brownlee*  
Charter Fishing/Sport Fishing

*Virginia Cronk*  
Education/Outreach

*Thomas N. Davidson*  
Recreational Fisher

*Fran Decker*  
Citizen at Large-Middle Keys

*Richard Grathwohl*  
Charter Fishing-Flats Guide

*Jim Fryer*  
Conservation and Environment

*Debra Harrison*  
Conservation and Environment

*David Hawtof*  
Citizen at Large-Lower Keys

*Tony Iarocci*  
Commercial Fishing-Shell/Scale

*Warren Johnson*  
Boating Industry

*Don Kincaid*  
Diving-Lower Keys

*Karen Lee*  
Citizen at Large-Upper Keys

*R. Duncan Mathewson III*  
Submerged Cultural Resources

*Ken Nedimyer*  
Commercial Fishing-  
Marine/Tropical

*George R. Neugent*  
Local Elected Official

*Anita Schwessinger*  
Tourism-Lower Keys

*Deborah A. Shaw*  
Research and Monitoring

Realistically, in the Sanctuary we don't manage the resources as much as we manage the activities of people who are interacting with the marine environment. For example, we don't teach the bonefish to duck when a PWC passes overhead. Instead, we attempt to teach the PWC operators that they should be operating in deeper water. However, sometimes I think it would be easier to teach the bonefish to duck!

My primary objective is to once again point out the importance of education and outreach as a critical tool in managing the Sanctuary. I have often said that it would take an army to protect Sanctuary resources if we relied solely on enforcement. We find that most of the general public complies with our messages once they receive them. This is where you come into the picture. We need your help in this and other National Marine Sanctuaries in getting our messages out about the importance of protecting the significant marine resources we all care so much about.

If you are not involved directly with a National Marine Sanctuary, I want to encourage you to get to know the issues and take a proactive role in working with Sanctuary program managers to communicate important messages to the broader public. Preparing this newsletter is a little like the cliché "preaching to the choir." I suspect each of you is already aware of the issues we face in the Sanctuary. Our next step is one we have to take together, as partners. We need you out in your community, talking to your friends and relatives, and, yes, strangers, about the importance of protecting Sanctuary resources and how they as individuals can make a difference.

People don't come to the Keys with the intention of destroying our seagrass beds, especially if they understand their importance. We need your help to carry that message forward. Talk to your family and friends. When you see someone launching a boat, remind them of our shallow waters and our special place called a Sanctuary. Together we can make a difference.

Sincerely,



# Around the Sanctuary

from PWC, pg. 1

The Sanctuary has recently taken two additional steps to alleviate user conflicts and natural resource violations associated with the improper operation of PWC. A program to install idle speed/no wake spar buoys 100 yards offshore from residential shorelines of the Keys has been initiated. This program involves private financing by homeowners associations using private contractors to install the buoys. The Sanctuary has also developed a law enforcement partnership with the Monroe County Sheriff to help enforce Sanctuary and state regulations in nearshore waters of the Keys. This enforcement activity will take place on six new Yamaha Waverunners which were donated to the Monroe County Sheriff's Office by the Yamaha Corporation.

## Tortugas Update

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary's proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve process is entering its final stages. July 31 marked the close of a two-month public comment period on the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement/Supplemental Management Plan for the proposed reserve in which approximately 4000 comments were received from throughout the United States and abroad. The majority of these comments were strongly in favor of an ecological reserve in the Tortugas area. In the next step of the process, all comments will be reviewed and responded to in the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS), which will be released in the fall. Several other agencies are also working to safeguard the unique marine resources of the Tortugas region. The National Park Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, and National Marine Fisheries Service are all in various stages of planning and rulemaking for this area. For more information on the Sanctuary's Tortugas Ecological Reserve proposal, visit

[www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov/tortugas](http://www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov/tortugas).

## Reef Medic Program Awarded Grant

The American Sportfishing Association's FishAmerica Foundation has awarded \$8500 to support community-based programs designed to restore essential fish habitat. The grant will be used to fund the treatment of black-band disease under the **REEF MEDIC** program. This program involves volunteers in the pioneering coral disease work started by Harold Hudson in the 1980s and continued today by Erik Franklin, Lauri MacLaughlin, and other FKNMS team members.

## SAC Vacancy Announcements

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council provides recommendations and assistance to Sanctuary managers. Eight Council members' terms will expire at the end of December. New members will be appointed for two-year terms which will begin on January 1, 2001.

Applications for the vacant seats are being accepted until Friday, October 13. New members will be notified by November 17 and invited to attend the December meeting of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council meeting as guests.

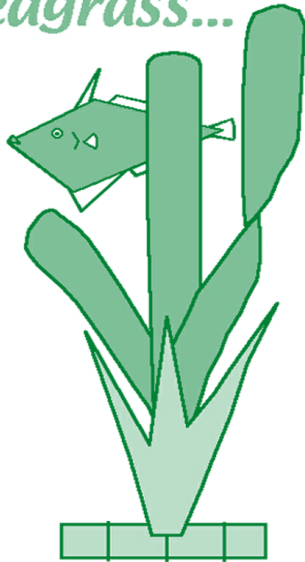
The vacant seats include: Diving-Upper Keys and Diving-Lower Keys, Recreational Fisher, Citizen at Large Upper Keys and Citizen at Large Middle Keys, Conservation and Environment, Boating Industry, and Commercial Fishing Shell/Scale.

If you are interested in applying for one of the vacant seats, please log on to our web page at <http://www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov/sac/welcome.html>. Additional information and an application may be downloaded from the web page. If you would like an application mailed to you or have any questions, please contact June Cradick at 305.743.2437 ext. 24.



# Seagrass

*Seagrass...*



*...it's alive!*

## **Seagrass Outreach Partnership**

The Seagrass Outreach Partnership was formed in 1997 to address the issue of damage to seagrass beds done by propellers and boat hulls. The purpose of the partnership is to educate people about the importance of seagrasses to the local economy and ecology and to provide information that helps boaters minimize their impacts to the many shallow seagrass beds in Florida waters. In March 2000, the Partnership sponsored Seagrass Awareness Month in Monroe County. Agencies and organizations participating in the Seagrass Outreach Partnership include the following:

*Florida Keys Guides Association  
Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges  
Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary  
Florida Park Service  
Department of Environmental Protection  
Monroe County Cooperative Extension 4-H program  
Save the Manatee Club  
Everglades National Park*

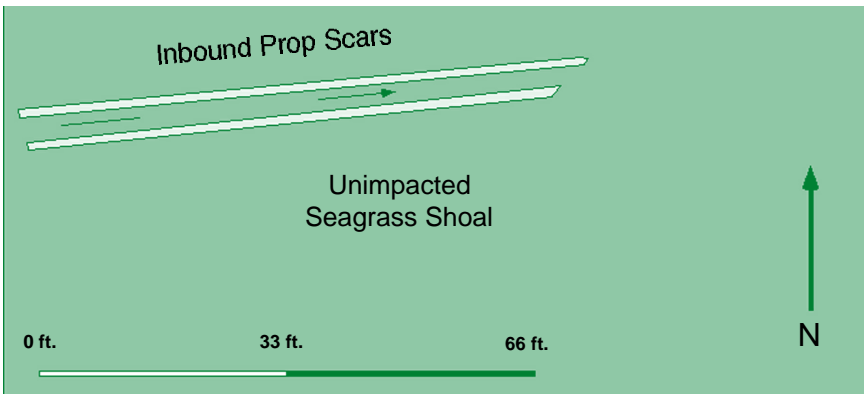
**If you run aground or are in shallow water stirring up mud behind your boat, you should:**

**STOP**

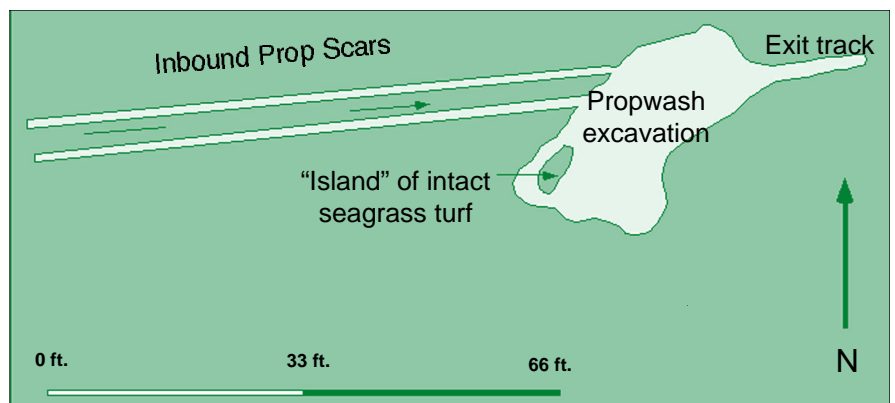
- 1. Turn your motor OFF! (Do NOT attempt to power off!)**
- 2. Trim your motor UP!**
- 3. Wait for high tide to drift free.**
- 4. Walk or pull your vessel to deeper water.**
- 5. Contact the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF radio channel 16 or the FWC 1-800-Dial-FMP (1-800-342-5367)  
\*FMP on a cell phone is a free call.**



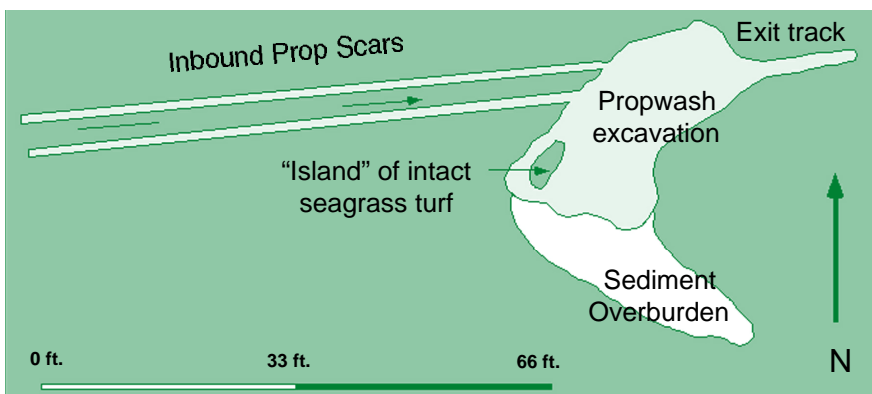
# Prop Scarring



The diagrams on this page were created to document the sequence of events that occurred when a twin-engine boat grounded on a seagrass flat within the Sanctuary. First, the boat propellers dredged parallel prop scars across the seagrass flat (above left). The severity of a scar left by a propeller is apparent in the underwater photograph (above right).



Second, when the boat operator attempted to "power off" using the engines, a barren sandy crater known as a "blow-hole" was created (above left). An exit track was also dredged leaving behind an intact "island" of seagrass turf and a propwash blow-hole (above right).



Finally, the propwash excavation by the boat engines caused sediment to become deposited behind the boat on top of unimpacted seagrass (above left). Blow-out scars, entrance and exit tracks, and sediment deposits are all visible in the aerial photograph (above right).

Bill Goodwin, Nancy Diersing, FKNMS

## Exotic Batfish Become Part of Educational Exhibit

Cheva Heck, FKNMS

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary recently dispatched two unlikely ambassadors to warn of a threat to the delicate balance of the coral reef ecosystem. Working in partnership with New England Aquarium, Dynasty Marine Associates and Reef Environmental Education Foundation, Sanctuary managers removed two Pacific Teira batfish from Molasses Reef off Key Largo. The fish now reside at the New England Aquarium, where they are part of an educational exhibit about the problems posed by the introduction of exotic species to the marine environment.



Two exotic Pacific batfish removed from Sanctuary waters are now part of an educational exhibit housed at the New England Aquarium. The exhibit focuses on the problems associated with introducing exotic species to marine ecosystems.

Pacific batfish are native to the South Pacific and are not related to the odd-shaped, bottom-dwelling batfish found in the Keys. In fact, the fish are related to and closely resemble the Atlantic spadefish native to the Keys, except that they grow larger and exhibit yellow markings.

Divers and snorkelers had reported sightings of one Pacific batfish at Molasses Reef for six years. But reports of a second and third fish alarmed Sanctuary staff. When REEF confirmed that three individuals were living at Molasses Reef, Sanctuary managers decided to remove the intruders in a friendly way.

No one knows for certain how the three batfish arrived at Molasses Reef, but it's likely that saltwater aquarium owners released them. Sold as juveniles,

Pacific batfish can grow to 24 inches, too large for many tanks.

Releasing exotic species is prohibited in the Sanctuary. Setting free one fish may seem harmless but can open the doorway to environmental catastrophe. If left alone, Sanctuary managers feared the fish could begin to breed and upset the natural ecosystem.

Capturing the first batfish took only a few minutes, but locating and capturing the wary second fish took more than an hour. Underwater scooters aided the collectors as they pursued the batfish up and down the reef. The divers finally netted the fish as it tried to hide among a school of spadefish, which they carefully freed.

After a quarantine period, the New England Aquarium released the two fish into a tank modeled after a Keys coral reef. The third batfish remains at large, but Sanctuary managers believe the fish poses minimal threat on its own.

### Did you know?

**\*Spiny lobster, grouper, and snapper have shown an increase in abundance in some of the Sanctuary's 23 no-take areas.**

**\*Scientists noted that the average size of legal lobsters was larger in the no-take areas than in adjacent fished areas.**

**\*REEF's Advanced Assessment Team regularly surveys 31 sites in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, including 12 SPAs, 3 Research-only Areas, 1 Ecological Reserve, and 6 sites in the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve.**

**\*In its National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force recommends that 5% of all U.S. coral reefs be designated "no-take" marine reserves by the year 2002.**

# Facts

## Divers Record Information on Fish Populations

Nancy Diersing, FKNMS

Divers and snorkelers participating in the Great American Fish Count kick-off dive on June 30 at Molasses Reef Sanctuary Preservation Area (SPA) were busy recording species of snappers, grunts, and groupers on their dive slates when three huge tarpon unexpectedly appeared and began to cruise the reef in search of prey. The silver kings moved as if they were one unit, not three individuals, as they crossed the reef crest, swam in and out of the sandy grooves, and finally disappeared out of sight.



Volunteer Colette Arvidson participated in the Great American Fish Count kick-off dive at Molasses Reef SPA.

Divers and snorkelers not only had the opportunity to observe these impressive fish in their natural environment, but were able to record their presence in a database that is readily accessible to scientists, resource managers, and anyone interested in fish populations. The database, which can be viewed at [www.reef.org](http://www.reef.org), is maintained by REEF, Reef Environmental Education Foundation, as part of their Fish Survey Program. New data are continually being entered into the

system as volunteers, trained in fish identification by REEF, contribute their latest observations about fish abundance and diversity.

Since 1992, with the support of the National Marine Sanctuary Program, REEF has coordinated the Great American Fish Count (GAFC)—a national campaign that takes place in Sanctuaries and coastal areas across the country during the first two weeks in July. The GAFC has several missions including raising awareness of fish populations and the marine environment and encouraging recreational divers and snorkelers to conduct fish surveys to collect scientifically valuable data for managers to use when making important decisions about marine resources.

During the kick-off dive, which was hosted by Sea Dwellers Dive Center, volunteer "fish counters",

Sanctuary and REEF divers, roamed the reef searching out and recording all the different species of fish they could find. This search and record technique is known as the "roving diver technique." Fish counters also noted the abundance of each species observed using an abundance code with four



David Festa, Department of Commerce; Billy Causey, FKNMS Superintendent; and Laddie Akins, REEF director; review their fish count data.

main categories: single (1), few (2-10), many (11-100), and abundant (>100). After the dive, the information recorded on the dive slates was transferred to scantron forms that were entered electronically into the main database.

At Molasses Reef SPA, a site that has been closed to fishing since 1997, eighty-seven different species of fish were recorded. Eighty-seven fish species were also counted at the second dive site, Pickles Reef, a fished area. Although the same number of species was present at both locales, the kinds of fish observed differed somewhat between the two sites. According to Leslie Whaylen, Field Operations Coordinator for REEF, "At the protected site (Molasses SPA), we saw more top predators such as groupers, snappers, and grunts than at the fished site (Pickles Reef). We also observed a greater abundance of fish in general at the Sanctuary Preservation Area site. "

In the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, a special team of REEF divers consisting of those who have passed a detailed fish identification test, has been formed to regularly monitor the SPAs and corresponding fished reference sites. Data collected by the REEF's Advanced Assessment Team along with information collected by other scientists studying the fish populations, will aid resource managers in making informed decisions about the Sanctuary zones and other management tools.



Sanctuary Friends of the Florida Keys' buoy banks are about to hit the streets. The banks, designed by Sanctuary Reef Doctor Harold Hudson, resemble a mooring buoy, complete with yellow down line and blue stripe. They will be placed in dive shops and other establishments that support the Sanctuary. Funds collected from the banks will be used for the mooring buoy program throughout the Keys.

Sanctuary Friends Board members Judy Halas and Jim Boruszak spearheaded the process, conferring with Team OCEAN staff members Amy Massey and John Nazzaro to determine bank locations. Shops accepting the banks will keep them for three months. They will then be rotated to other locations giving everyone an opportunity to help support the Sanctuary's mooring buoy project.

In the fall, Sanctuary Friends will host the second annual Florida Keys UnderSeas FotoFest. This event will showcase the wonderful underwater photography of the many world class photographers living right here in the Keys. The time and place of this exhibit will soon be announced, watch for it.



Amy Slate, Amoray Dive Shop owner, accepts a buoy bank from Sanctuary Friends Board Member Judy Halas and Superintendent Billy Causey at the Maritime Community Meeting in Key Largo.

One way to keep informed of the happenings of Sanctuary Friends of the Florida Keys is to become a member. Members will be placed on the Friends' e-mail list and will be informed about upcoming activities. As a Friends member, you can help educate people about the programs, policies and goals of the Florida Keys National Marine

Sanctuary. Email Sanctuary Friends at [sanctuary.friends@noaa.gov](mailto:sanctuary.friends@noaa.gov) or call 305.872.3522 to receive a membership application.



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