

sun-sentinel.com/sports/other/fl-lionfish-problem-0903-20100902,0,1337106.story

South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Lionfish a growing problem

South Florida divers trying to stop the exotic species

By Steve Waters, Sun Sentinel

3:28 PM EDT, September 2, 2010

With more and more lionfish showing up in South Florida waters, local divers are doing what they can to stop the invasion of the venomous species.

The latest effort was Sunday's inaugural Lionfish Shootout, which was organized by Capt. Tony Coulter of the Diversity dive boat, which sails out of Boca Inlet.

"Probably about two years ago, divers would say, 'There's a lionfish down there,' " Coulter said. "I'd say probably within the last six months it's been nuts. They're everywhere."

Poor weather conditions Sunday limited the turnout for the Shootout and forced Coulter to cancel his afternoon dive, but a number of lionfish were brought to the cookout that evening at Pennells Marina in Deerfield Beach.

Dustin Eich shot about a dozen lionfish to win the Shootout and a silver stingray pendant. Eich carefully cleaned his catch, using shears to cut off the venomous spines on the dorsal, pectoral and anal fins.

The flesh of the lionfish is safe to eat, and Coulter headed and gutted the fish and sautéed them in butter and garlic. Most of those who sampled the white flesh pronounced it quite tasty.

Lionfish are in the scorpionfish family, they have no predators in Florida and they eat a lot of native reef species. Divers need to be wary of lionfish because their stings are painful.

"It's like a hot needle being stabbed into you," said Christina Acevedo, a Pompano Beach resident who is studying marine biology at FIU and has read most everything that has been written about lionfish. "I have heard of people who have permanent nerve damage" from being stung by lionfish.

Acevedo, who saw and cleaned numerous lionfish while doing research in the Bahamas, noted that even dead lionfish can sting you, which she discovered while cleaning one two hours after the fish was speared. The U.S. Geological Survey recommends treating a sting by immersing the wound in hot water for 15-20 minutes as well

as calling the Aquatic Toxins Hotline at the Florida Poison Information Center in Miami at 888-232-8635.

According to the USGS website nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/FactSheet.aspx?SpeciesID=963, lionfish are native to the western Pacific Ocean. At least six lionfish got into Biscayne Bay in 1992 after Hurricane Andrew broke an aquarium containing the fish. It is also assumed that aquarium owners who tired of the fish illegally released them in local waters. Lionfish have been documented in the Gulf of Mexico, the Keys and along the Atlantic Coast from Florida to North Carolina.

Stephen Attis of Pompano Beach-based Vone Research (vonersearch.org), a non-profit organization whose mission is to study, conserve and protect local marine resources and educate others about them, said the group started a special website, lionfishhunters.org, to address the lionfish problem. The site has lots of good information, as well as lionfish photos, a video of Acevedo cleaning a lionfish and lionfish recipes.

The goal is to "bring the entire dive community together" to do something about the problem of lionfish. Dive boat operators have reported the GPS numbers of lionfish sightings to Vone, which welcomes lionfish reports from local divers. Lionfish sightings also can be reported to the USGS online at nas.er.usgs.gov/sightingreport.asp or by calling 877-STOPANS.

"We don't want to wait," said Attis, who brought a couple of lionfish to the Shootout cookout. "We want to get everybody looking for them. Let us know where they are and we'll collect them."

Attis said he has speared lionfish as deep as 130 feet. He added that small, juvenile lionfish are typically shallow, with bigger fish in 90 feet.

In March, a juvenile lionfish was found at the Blue Heron Bridge in Riviera Beach. Barry Shaw of Plantation and his sons Hobie, 13, and Drake, 10, have caught four lionfish 1-4 inches since June snorkeling with hand nets inside Hillsboro Inlet.

"They sure are pretty, but we know they don't belong here," said Shaw, who destroyed all four fish.

Tami Beckel, who created the lionfishhunters.org site, said it was thought lionfish didn't get bigger than 15 inches in length, but Vone diver Wes Gruver shot a 17-incher.

Coulter plans to have another lionfish spearfishing contest. Several lionfish derbies are planned in the Keys by the Reef Environmental Education Foundation. Those contests, which will be Sept. 11 in Key Largo, Oct. 16 in Marathon and possibly Nov. 13 in Key West, will have an entry fee of \$100 per four-diver team and pay \$1,000 to the team spearing the most lionfish, \$500 for second and \$250 for third. The biggest and smallest lionfish will each be worth \$500. Visit reef.org.

Steve Waters can be reached at 954-356-4648 or swaters@SunSentinel.com

Copyright © 2010, South Florida Sun-Sentinel