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NOAA scientists now know more about extent of the lionfish invasion in the Florida Keys

New research documents a population explosion; increase of more than 200,000 fish in one year

For the first time since lionfish were spotted in the Florida Keys, scientists are now able to determine how many and how quickly this invasive species is taking over. In an article out today in the Bulletin of Marine Science , NOAA Fisheries' scientists along with agency partners document the abundance and rapid spread of lionfish throughout the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

In 2010 researchers estimated there were 89,000 lionfish in the Keys, in 2011 those estimates increased six-fold to 335,000 fish, which is likely a conservative estimate since lionfish hide in the reef. Lionfish have been present in low numbers along the east coast of Florida since the 1980's, but were not reported in the Florida Keys until 2009. According to researchers, the average size of lionfish also increased. Scientists expected lionfish to eventually appear and increase in abundance in the Keys, but the rate of increase is both surprising and alarming.

"Lionfish are voracious predators and are most likely having impacts on native fish species, disrupting the ecology of the area they invade," said Ben Ruttenberg, fishery biologist with NOAA Fisheries. "Lionfish have no natural predators in their invaded range in the Caribbean and Atlantic. With long-term monitoring, we will be able to document and understand the ecosystem impacts of this invasive predator."

Scientists continue to ask the public to help. When people see or catch a lionfish off the Florida Keys they can visit reef.org/lionfish and report the sighting. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), working with Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF), a non-profit partner and NOAA maintains the database for lionfish sightings. Scientists continue to ask the public to help. When people see or catch a lionfish off the Florida Keys they can visit reef.org/lionfish and report the sighting.

"The detailed information that we receive from divers, fishermen, and other outdoor enthusiasts helps supplement a more formal set of records that we collect from museums, agencies, journals, and other published reports that we use to track sightings of invasive marine fishes," said Pam Schofield, research ecologist for USGS. "This study offers a great validation of citizen reports."

This latest research and information from the public will help fishery managers make important decisions relating to protecting native fish and the ecosystem from this invasive species.

Other authors cited in this newly released publication include scientists from the USGS, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the National Park Service and the University of Miami.

**Photos of lionfish taken during research surveys are also available upon request.*

For more information on lionfish and the volunteer survey project visit:
http://www.reef.org/programs/volunteersurvey
http://nas.er.usgs.gov/queries/factsheet.aspx?speciesid=963
http://www.ccfhr.noaa.gov/stressors/lionfish.aspx

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