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This Web of Life Beneath Our Feet

By Mark Howell

Marine life busily consuming itself in and around the encrusted Vandenberg ... How humans can make dolphins happier ... What on earth happened to water-based tourism in the Keys — these were among the topics aired at a lively Sanctuary Advisory Council meeting held Tuesday at the Eco-Discovery Center on Truman Waterfront.

Debra Harrison, an appointee on Governor Charlie Crist's 21-member Action Team on Energy and Climate Change in 2007 and a key political figure in the development of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, fired off a parting shot in

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PHOTO BY DON KINCAID

Filter feeders called sea tunicates have consumed most of the algae that first coated the Vandenberg.

IN THE NEWS

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relinquishing her position on the council.

"As I leave my seat," Debbie told the 25 or so members present, cutting an impressive figure at the microphone, "there is something really, really big out there." It has, she said, "a looming, potentially catastrophic impact. And we're the canary."

Global warming, she announced, "is impacting the reef as severely as any other place in the world — which we discover each time we send scientists out there." It is, she said, "not acceptable. A two-degree centigrade increase in temperature worldwide will destroy our ecosystem."

Whereupon the departing member persuaded her fellow councilors to pass a resolution calling for a two-degree-centigrade limit at the Copenhagen summit on global warming. "Our job, your job," she told them, "is to insist on change."

This, then, was quite a different Sanctuary from the days of its origins in the 1990s. The Florida Keys Sanctuary was once seen by some Keys locals as a government sea grab, even as those locals were viewed in Washington, D.C. as "pirates," recalled Debbie. ("We're losing that, by the way," she added.)

Billy Causey became quite outspoken about this at Tuesday's meeting. The founding superintendent of the Florida Keys Sanctuary — Sean Morton is his successor — Causey is now regional director for the National Marine Sanctuaries in the Southeast and Gulf of Mexico. "We went through tough times in the 1990s," he told the council, "and to see where we are today gives me chill bumps." But there are changes in the wind, he warned, "a whole portfolio of them coming your way, so get your rest now."

Nutrient criteria for Gulf waters at one time was a subject of dispute between the Sanctuary and a number of vocal scientific critics in South Florida and the Keys. The Sanctuary today accepts that its previous position had clung to a "narrative" standard hard to quantify; now the focus is on parts per million of nitrogen and phospho-

rus content (i.e. agricultural fertilizer run-off).

The hugest of huge cruise ships, Royal Caribbean's Oasis of the Seas, is definitely "on NOAA's agenda," Causey advised the council. Will 5,000-passenger ships ever reach Key West? "I'll tell you right now," he said. "It ain't gonna happen." Any new dredging is prohibited in the Sanctuary.

"But we can always be trumped by the government," cautioned Causey. "It's the nature of bureaucracy." The Navy and the Corps of Engineers have already been in touch about a planned re-dredging of the harbor for maintenance purposes. "Same width, same depth," insisted Causey.

"The state of the reef is despicable," said one fisherman. Said Lee Starling, a particularly fluent fisherman: "It's cowboys and Indians out there — There's no law enforcement but Coast Guard — Poaching is like crack — Everyone's selling illegal fish — We need to restore enforcement at the choke points into the harbor."

In the midst of it all are the dolphins. Our cetacean friends, with whom we once used to swim at the "dolphin triangle" toward the far end of the northwest channel, turn out to have gotten far less from those encounters than we humanoids did.

"Interactions between people and dolphins in the water," explained Laura Engleby of NOAA's Dolphin Ecology Project, "can lead to changes in the dolphins." Reduced fertility, for example. The price of a dolphin's tolerance for human interplay is apparently greater than any benefit. Over the past five years, 40 dolphin tours have operated out of Key West. During the same period there has been a detectable shift from "swimming with" to "viewing."

The Sanctuary "aims to keep dolphins wild," concluded Engleby.

In census-speak they call it a "decadal" study. The SAC meeting took an early look at a Keys' Visitor Study to be released in February. Authors of the study are Vernon (Bob) Leeworthy, chief economist at NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, and David K. Loomis, director at

the University of Massachusetts of a program called Human Dimensions of Marine and Coastal Ecosystems.

These two experts measured participation in 71 tourist activities in the Keys, in 42 categories, over a 12-year period. "Are we out of business here, do people no longer want what we have?" Bob Leeworthy asked himself. "I'll have to find out."

As the study shows, there are some real gains in the tourist industry in the Keys.

Yet the study is largely a snapshot of diminishment.

The household income of our visitors increased a whopping 47.3 percent between 1996 and 2008. Visits to museums or historic sites jumped a dramatic 48.4, with attendance at festivals or cultural events up by 43.6 percent. Spending by all visitors increased by 22 percent, from \$1.63 billion in 1995-96 to \$1.99 in 2007-08. Overall visitation to the Keys increased by about 7 percent.

But a much higher percentage of visitors are now participating in land-based activities only. All water-based activities have lost ground in the last 12 years. Scuba-diving visits dropped 28 percent in the 12 years prior to the sinking of the Vandenberg. Snorkeling visits fell by 8.8 percent. Fishing visits fell 27.3 percent.

Also heading south is the average length of a visitor's stay in the Keys, from six days down to 4.9 days in season; from 4.2 days down to 3.5 days in the summer. Spending per trip also declined. "Intensity" (value of the recreation) of visitation went down 14 percent. Cruise ship spending has crashed by 39.1 percent.

What is clearly up — report be damned! — is the fervor of those in the dive industry currently in the glare of publicity from the Vandenberg. Biggest dive site of its kind in the nation, the sunken hulk is causing a sensation among divers worldwide.

Don Kincaid, renowned diver and photographer who has made 18 Vandenberg dives to date, and Bob Smith, director of the community college's dive school, painted a rosy picture of the new dive site. Clearly the sinking of the ship is the best thing that has happened to water-based tourism in



PHOTO BY DON KINCAID

Four months after its sinking, a one-inch-thick coating of red algae covered the submerged Vandenberg.

the Keys since the deterioration of the reef began.

"There's lots of juvenile species everywhere," reported Kincaid on the local scene at the ship. "Everything's eating everything else." After four months at the bottom, the paint had faded and a coat of red algae covered everything, including the big dish antennae. Then little black dots of sea tunicates ate up all the algae. Now attracting all kinds of marine life since its first barracuda visitors, the Vandenberg today attracts sometimes 30 divers at one spot.

That's the good news.

"Restlessness and discontent are the first sign of progress," quoted council chair (and fisherman) Bruce Popham at the outset. He summed up by saying, "We have a good, strong advisory council that works well together."

Council member Martin "Skip" Moe said it purely: "There is no other place in the continental United States that can hold a candle to the Keys. We know it's in trouble. We are doing everything we can to protect this special place, this web of life beneath our feet."

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New NOAA Program Helps Public Be Dolphin SMART



MARK HOWELL/Solares Hill

Helping to improve human-dolphin relations in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary are, from left, Cheryl Bonnes and Jessica Powell of the Dolphin SMART program; Karrie Carnes, media relations for the Sanctuary; Laura Engleby of the Dolphin Ecology project and Stacey Horstman of NOAA's Marine Fisheries Service.

SMART stands for: S - Stay back 50 yards from dolphins; M - Move away cautiously if dolphins show signs of disturbance; A - Always put your engine in neutral when dolphins are near; R - Refrain from feeding, touching or swimming with wild dolphins; T - Teach others to be dolphin SMART.

To find out more about Dolphin Smart, e-mail karrie.carnes@noaa.gov.