

Blue Star gives businesses gold star

Monday, April 13, 2009

Program rewards companies for reef-friendly training

By TIMOTHY O'HARA Citizen Staff

The coral reef has long been the draw that has brought millions of divers, snorkelers and fishermen from around the world to the Florida Keys.

But it is not an unlimited resource, environmentalists warn. The fragile and complex ecosystem faces several threats, including pollution, global warming, improper anchoring and careless diving and snorkeling. The Keys have lost 37 percent of coral cover since 1996, as the reef has seen increases in white pox, white band and other coral diseases.

Diving generated \$250 million in sales to the Keys in 2000-2001, which was a little more than 9 percent of the entire Monroe County economy then.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary has embarked on many programs to educate the public on coral reef conservation. The sanctuary is bumping up its efforts and soon will begin recognizing and promoting local dive shops that agree to teach visiting divers and snorkelers about coral reef ecology and ways to protect the reef, as part of a new program called Blue Star.

The sanctuary has been working on the program with local dive operators since 2004.

"We are fortunate in the Florida Keys to have a beautiful reef just a short boat ride away," sanctuary spokeswoman Karrie Carnes said. "The ease of access to our reef makes it one of the most heavily frequented in the world. Multiply the number of accidental fin kicks and misplaced hands by the number of visitors on our reefs annually and you have the potential for significant stress due to cumulative, yet preventable, injuries."



The Blue Star program, funded through sales of the Save Our Reefs license plate, seeks to provide operators with the training and tools with which to educate their patrons, raise awareness and help mitigate some of the local impacts to the reef -- while turning snorkelers and divers into ocean stewards in the process, Carnes said.

Dive shops would be required to train employees through classes about coral and sanctuary regulations, participate in fish counts and cleanups and provide more detailed pre-dive briefings to patrons. The sanctuary would provide operators with briefing cards outlining facts about coral reef ecology and spelling out why snorkelers and divers should never touch or take coral. The card also would remind divers that coral is a fragile animal susceptible to various fatal diseases.

"The reef is a precious jewel we have to protect," Dive Key West owner CeCe Roycraft said. "It's about being a good steward. This is an easy platform to put the message out. You have a captive audience on your boat."

Roycraft, who along with Bob Holston has operated Dive Key West for 38 years, hopes that tourists will return home with a better knowledge of the reef and will call on their elected officials to support reef conservation programs.

In exchange for their educating the public, the businesses would be given plaques to place on their boats stating that they are commended by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which oversees the 13 national marine sanctuaries. The shops would be listed on the sanctuary's Web page and sanctuary officials would promote the shops at dive trade shows and in the media.

The federal sanctuary program spends millions of dollars each year researching coral diseases and deaths and educating the public on reef ecosystems.

"If we don't take care of it, it will disappear," said Diane Lundy, a dive master at Looe Key Resort and Dive Center. "We have a real treasure in our own backyard. ... It's about good stewardship. This is a great tool."

The sanctuary will have a training session this month in Key West, Marathon and Key Largo, respectively, at the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center on April 28, Marathon Government Center on April 27 and Key Largo library on April 30.

This would be the second sanctuary program that recognizes and rewards operators for being good stewards. Through a program called Dolphin Smart, the sanctuary promotes dive operators who follow the rules laid out in the Marine Mammal Protection Act and engage in sustainable wild-dolphin viewing practices. The acronym SMART is a reminder of the basic principles: stay, move, always refrain, and teach others about sustainable dolphin watching practices. Dolphin operators should stay at least 50 yards from dolphins, move away slowly if the dolphins seem disturbed, and put the engine in neutral when dolphins are near. They also should refrain from feeding, touching or swimming with wild dolphins, and teach others to be Dolphin SMART, said program coordinator Megan Harber.

In return, the operators are listed on the sanctuary's Dolphin SMART Web site, <http://www.DolphinSmart.org>, and other educational and promotional program materials that are

distributed through Florida Keys chambers of commerce, concierges and booking agents, hotels and other tourist locales. Being a member of the program also affords participating operators with opportunities for extra media exposure.

The program, which educates operators on marine mammal laws, dolphin research and dolphin behavior, since has been replicated in other states. Dolphin SMART has been launched in Alabama, and the groups are working on establishing it in Hawaii. As Dolphin SMART, Blue Star has the potential to be replicated in other states, Carnes said.

tohara@keysnews.com

[Home](#) | [About us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Keys Marketplace](#) | [Visitor Information](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Employment Opportunities](#) | [Site Plan](#)

Source URL: <http://keysnews.com/node/12239>