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Board of County Commissioners

May 19, 2022



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Destin-Fort Walton Beach Hosts World's Largest Lionfish Tournament

Okaloosa County, Fla. – Divers participating in the 4th Annual Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Tournament successfully removed 13,835 lionfish from local waters. The invasive species prey on native fish and have no known predators due to their venomous spines. Hosted by Destin-Fort Walton Beach, alongside Florida Fish and Wildlife at HarborWalk Village and AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar, this event is a key component in mitigating the risk of a growing lionfish threat.

"We are fortunate to have a Coastal Resources Division in our community, focused on awareness and reducing the population of this invasive species," said Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners Chairman Mel Ponder.

Divers from all over the country traveled to Destin-Fort Walton Beach for the spearfishing tournament held on May 13th and 14th. An award ceremony was held on Sunday announcing the winners of various categories including most lionfish removed, largest and smallest. The record for the smallest lionfish was broken at 39 millimeters during the main tournament by Alabama Jammin. Diver Tim Shivers collected 604 lionfish during the pre-tournament which surpassed the 2019 record. Thanks to Emerald Coast Open sponsors, participants were awarded \$48,000 in cash and approximately \$50,000 in prizes. Click [HERE](#) for a list of this year's winners.

Several events were held over the weekend in conjunction with the tournament including The Lionfish Removal & Awareness Day Festival hosted with Florida Fish and Wildlife which garnered 5,000 attendees. Over 40 vendors were in attendance with educational activities that focused on conservation efforts. Lionfish & Libations was a new event held at HarborWalk Village. These events allowed locals and visitors to learn about lionfish and even have the chance to experience tastings.

Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Restaurant Week was held the week leading up to the tournament. Each evening, a local restaurant served a unique lionfish dish on their menu. The fish caught pre-tournament were provided to the participating restaurants to serve. The lionfish dishes were scored by a host of judges including a New Yorker Magazine journalist and Chief Scientist for NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries. A scoring system was used and Chef Al Massa took the highest marks with Brotula's Seafood House & Steamer creation. They presented a Lionfish Pan-Seared dish with Black Forbidden Rice, Melting Zucchini Ribbons, with a Chardonnay Shellfish butter.

"We couldn't be happier with the success of this year's Emerald Coast Open Tournament with 145 tournament participants and 50 volunteers donating their time. Thank you to our sponsors for their support that continues the growth of the tournament and the education of lionfish management. The removal of this many lionfish from our local water restores the ecosystem, especially as we head into a busy fishing season," said Alex Fogg, Coastal Resource Manager, Destin-Fort Walton Beach.

For more information on the Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Tournament visit emeraldcoastopen.com and for more on Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Florida, please visit www.destinfb.com.

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