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Board of County Commissioners

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FORT
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World's Largest Lionfish Tournament Harvests Over 20,000 Lionfish

Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Florida – The Gulf waters are a little safer for diving and a little less invasive thanks to over 100 divers from across the United States who participated in the 2026 Emerald Coast Open. Divers at this year's Emerald Coast Open removed more than 20,000 lionfish from the Gulf in and around the vast artificial reef system in Destin-Fort Walton Beach. The lionfish tournament coincided with the Lionfish Festival at HarborWalk Village and Restaurant Week, which produced plenty of lionfish-inspired dishes.

"This free family-friendly event has brought divers from across the country to our amazing area since 2019," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "What our natural resources staff and partners have been able to do is remarkable. They have created a festive event for the community that also gives back to our marine ecosystem."

The Emerald Coast Open includes a pre-tournament where divers harvested a total of 5,734 lionfish. The main two-day tournament earlier this month yielded 15,018 lionfish captured by divers for a total of 20,752. Lionfish were measured and weighed behind AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar, with the nearby Lionfish Festival hosted by HarborWalk Village.

Divers competed in teams for over \$100,000 in cash and gear prizes provided by event partners. Categories included smallest lionfish, largest lionfish and most lionfish caught. Local restaurants also competed for best lionfish cuisine during Restaurant Week, leading up to the main tournament. Winners include:

- 1st Place (\$10,000 prize) - Most Lionfish – DWM Off the Deep End – 2,641
- 1st Place (\$5,000 prize) - Largest Lionfish – Lady Ray – 461 mm
- 1st Place (\$5,000 prize) - Smallest Lionfish – Nole Mercy Spearfishing – 56 mm
- Restaurant Week Winner – La Paz Restaurante & Cantina (4th Year in a Row)
- Winner (\$1,000 Prize) of "Guess how many lionfish will be caught?" – Trenlon Harris – Gussed: 15,014 (Actual 15,018)

View a complete list of the standings [here](#).

Lionfish are an invasive species with few known predators in the Gulf. Due to their leisurely nature, hook and line fishing is not as effective as a diver armed with spears.

- Learn more about the tournament at <https://emeraldcoastopen.com/>
- Learn more about Destin-Fort Walton Beach's Natural Resource efforts at <https://www.destinfb.com/explore/eco-tourism/>

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