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Board of County Commissioners

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DESTIN
FORT
WALTON
BEACH
FLORIDA



Destin-Fort Walton Beach sets new records at World's Largest Lionfish Tournament

(Okaloosa County, Florida) – Divers participating in the 5th Annual Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Tournament set a new record with the successful removal of 24,699 lionfish. Last year's total was 13,835. Divers from around the country competed for prize money totaling over \$100,000 in an effort to eradicate this invasive species in the Gulf of Mexico. Lionfish have few known predators due to their venomous spines.

"Okaloosa County continues to be a leader in helping to create sustainable marine ecosystems," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "We are thankful for all of the divers and sponsors who helped make this event so successful."

The Emerald Coast Open, hosted by Destin-Fort Walton Beach Tourism and Florida Fish and Wildlife was held May 19-20 with an award ceremony at AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar on May 21. The tournament had 144 divers participate, competing in a variety of categories. The largest lionfish was caught by a diver from the team Dibs on Bottom and measured 17.95 inches while the diving team Deep Water Mafia caught the most lionfish at 2,898. In addition to the main tournament over the weekend, the event also set a pre-tournament record of 5,139 lionfish caught.

The tournament coincided with the 5th Annual Lionfish Removal & Awareness Festival along the HarborWalk Village in Destin. The festival included Lionfish & Libations, an event where the public tried samplings of various local brews paired with food provided by participating vendors. Various educational booths were also set up for a crowd of about 5,000 to learn about the species.

Leading up to the tournament, Emerald Coast Open Restaurant Week offered the public unique lionfish dishes prepared by chefs at local restaurants that both satisfied their customers while also informing them of this beautiful, yet invasive species. Judges selected La Paz as this year's winner who served Filete de Lionfish Empapelado. Ingredients included lionfish, epazote, calabacitas, carrot, potato, and peppers.

"Every year this event gets bigger and bigger and wouldn't be possible without the community's support," said Alex Fogg, Coastal Resource Manager with Destin-Fort Walton Beach Tourism. "We know that lionfish removal events have significant positive impacts on the local ecosystem. Hosting the Emerald Coast Open in Destin – Fort Walton Beach at the beginning of the season really does help our local fishery that is so important to our destination."

More results and information can be found at www.emeraldcoastopen.com. For more information on Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Florida, please visit www.destinfb.com.

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