

PRSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
ST. PETERSBURG
PERMIT 5899

c/o Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council
4000 Gateway Centre Blvd.
Suite 100
Pinellas Park, FL 33782



- + Vanishing Waterfront: Public Access Slipping Away
- 2 Profile: Peter Betzer, Blazing Trails at USF
- 3 News Briefs & Follow Through
- 4 Tampa Bay Bucks Another Trend
- 5 Up The Creek?
- 7 Community Grants Available
- 10 Tampa Bay Hatchery Searches for New Home
- +1 Scoop that Poop!
- +12 Ship Holds Probed for Invaders
- +13 Book Review: Last Child in the Woods
- +14 Editor's Desk
- +15 Calendar
- +16 Robinson Preserve Transformation Begins

Young Salts Dive into Science



The 487-acre Robinson Preserve (left) in Bradenton is Manatee County's newest and largest coastal preserve. Tampa Bay appears in the upper right corner.

Photo courtesy Manatee County

By Jennifer Dupont

Squinting through the murky waters of Tampa Bay, I try to locate the four divers who are part of my group. I kick twice and glide forward, straight into one buddy team as they swim side-by-side along a transect line, photographing each meter of the artificial reef we are surveying. A couple of kicks later, I spot another pair of divers as they record sponge, algae, fish and invertebrate species on their underwater data

sheets. When the scientific tasks are completed, we slowly ascend to the surface to begin assembling and discussing our data.

What's remarkable about the group that surrounds me is that most of divers are not even 18 years old, yet they are able to perform demanding scientific tasks accurately and efficiently, despite the less-than-ideal diving conditions (strong currents and low visibility) often encountered in Tampa Bay. The kids are part of an organization called the Scuba Scouts of Tampa Bay, the only group of its kind in the nation. Formed in 2001, the group

consists of middle and high school students from all over the St. Petersburg/Tampa area with a shared passion for exploring the ocean through SCUBA diving. They range from newly certified open water divers to advanced divers with Nitrox (mixed air) and special lifesaving certifications.

They've logged hundreds of hours underwater running video, taking pictures, collecting fish and coral data, and assisting in numerous research projects. They have experienced the cloudy shallow waters of Tampa Bay and the gin-clear waters of numerous Florida springs, fought a ripping cur-

rent offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, swam with the sharks of the Grand Bahamas Banks – and even stepped foot inside the underwater habitat Aquarius in the Florida Keys.

On this research expedition, the Scuba Scouts are monitoring the underwater life forming around large limestone boulders placed at six sites east of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge – part of a project funded by Gulfstream Natural Gas System to mitigate damages from the construction of a natural gas pipeline that stretches 691 miles from

Young Salts
Continued on page 13

Young Salts

Continued from page 16

Alabama to Port Manatee. The boulders have recruited thriving communities of algae, sponges, octocorals, tunicates and numerous other benthic biota. They also attract large stone crabs and fish such as sheephead searching for food and habitat.

For a typical monitoring dive, three buddy teams are dispatched to survey the Gulfstream sites. After donning 30 to 40 pounds of SCUBA gear, including a wetsuit, buoyancy compensation device (BCD), a regulator and a SCUBA tank, we divvy up the science equipment. Our tools consist of underwater data sheets and pencils, a video camera, spools of transect lines, a digital camera and other sampling gear. The buddies perform a final equipment check (make sure that air is turned on!) and giant-stride their way off the boat and into Tampa Bay. We time our dives to arrive on site at slack tide to eliminate the extra stress of battling strong currents. After locating the rock piles, the teams go to work performing their respective tasks and the data is eventually entered into a spreadsheet while the pictures and video are archived for further analyses.

Although the Scuba Scouts have monitored the sites only sporadically for the past four years, we are now beginning to conduct surveys on a monthly basis before the winter cold sets in. Volunteers from

the University of South Florida's College of Marine Science, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, and the Florida Keys Natural Marine Sanctuary advise them on and off the water as they learn new sampling and biotic identification techniques.

With boundless enthusiasm and professionalism, the next generation of great ocean explorers are training right here in Tampa Bay.

Jennifer Dupont is a doctoral student in the College of Marine Science at USF in St. Petersburg. For more information, contact her at jdupont@marine.usf.edu.



Caption for these 2 photos

Scouting for Help?

Perish the thought. You're languishing in the lab without a research buddy to help scope out some underwater haunt for answers to questions about Tampa Bay. The Scuba Scouts may be just the young salts for the job. Ranging in age from 11 to 18, these divers are experienced in research, rescue and exploration. Best of all, they're scouting for new research assignments. Got a lead or a project that might be applicable? Send inquiries to jdupont@marine.usf.edu.