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## Florida students team with federal, state agencies to study coral reefs

Tampa Bay area students will work hand in hand this summer with scientists from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to attempt to document the spawning of staghorn coral in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Students with SCUBAnauts International, a youth education organization, will be in Key Largo Aug. 7-11 to help biologists better understand this species' reproduction.

Staghorn coral is classified as a federally threatened species. Although scientists have never documented the spawning of staghorn coral in the Florida Keys, they can determine the approximate time of the spawning, based on the behavior of related coral species. Staghorn coral spawn only once a year. The spawning activity is brief, lasting only for about 15 minutes in one evening, making it a challenge to observe.

During their trip, the students will make several dives each night until the spawning occurs. With the help of FWC and NOAA scientists, SCUBAnauts students will scientifically document the event and collect sperm and eggs released

by spawning corals. NOAA will use the sample to promote new coral growth and assist in recovering the species.

“We selected 25 of our most advanced kids, because we know they can handle the rigors of repetitive night-diving and perform the science tasks required to successfully complete this research project,” said Dr. David Palandro, an FWC research scientist who volunteers as Chief Scientist for SCUBAnauts International. “We hope this project will foster continued collaboration between the FWC, NOAA, and the SCUBAnauts.”

SCUBAnauts International is a nonprofit organization committed to educating 12- to 18-year-old students about the marine environment. Professional scientists and divers train SCUBAnauts students to meet the same qualifications as professional science divers. This training includes CPR, first aid, rescue diver training, oxygen administration and other skills.

SCUBAnauts students have performed scientific dives in Hawaii, the Bahamas, Tampa Bay, the Gulf of Mexico, the Florida Keys and other locations. This summer, the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation recognized the organization for its volunteer and environmental work at the Capitol Hill Ocean Week awards dinner in Washington, D.C. Last year, while in Washington for the same event, White House staff invited the students to meet with first lady Laura Bush.

For information about SCUBAnauts, visit [www.scubanautsintl.org](http://www.scubanautsintl.org). More information on coral reef research is available at <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/> or <http://research.MyFWC.com>.

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