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Bay area students receive EPA award in Mississippi for conservation work

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Gulf of Mexico Program recognized SCUBAnauts International, Tampa Bay Chapter (SNI-TB) at the 2009 Gulf Guardian Awards Thursday in Biloxi, Mississippi. The group received a Gulf Guardian Award in the Education Category for their volunteer coral conservation work.

SNI-TB students monitored corals in the Gulf of Mexico with Dr. Jennifer Dupont, as part of a University of South Florida (USF) graduate study. Students helped the scientists collect and analyze data from eight artificial reef sites on a quarterly basis to track the coral community's development.

This project is a critical extension of a monitoring study of the artificial reef status following the 2005 red tide event. The study, conducted in conjunction with the Florida Aquarium, Gulfstream Natural Gas Systems, and USF provided important insight into the health of coexisting natural and artificial flora and fauna after a significant red tide event.

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

The Gulf of Mexico Program initiated the Gulf Guardian Awards in 2000 to recognize and honor businesses, community groups, individuals and agencies that are taking positive steps to keep the Gulf healthy, beautiful and productive. Underwritten by the EPA, the program is a non-regulatory group of federal agencies and representatives of the business and agricultural communities, fishing industry, scientists, environmentalists and community leaders from all five Gulf states.

For more information about the Gulf Guardian Awards and the Gulf of Mexico Program, visit www.epa.gov/gmpo. To learn more about the SNI-TB program, visit <http://www.scubanautsintl.com/chapters/tampabay/>.