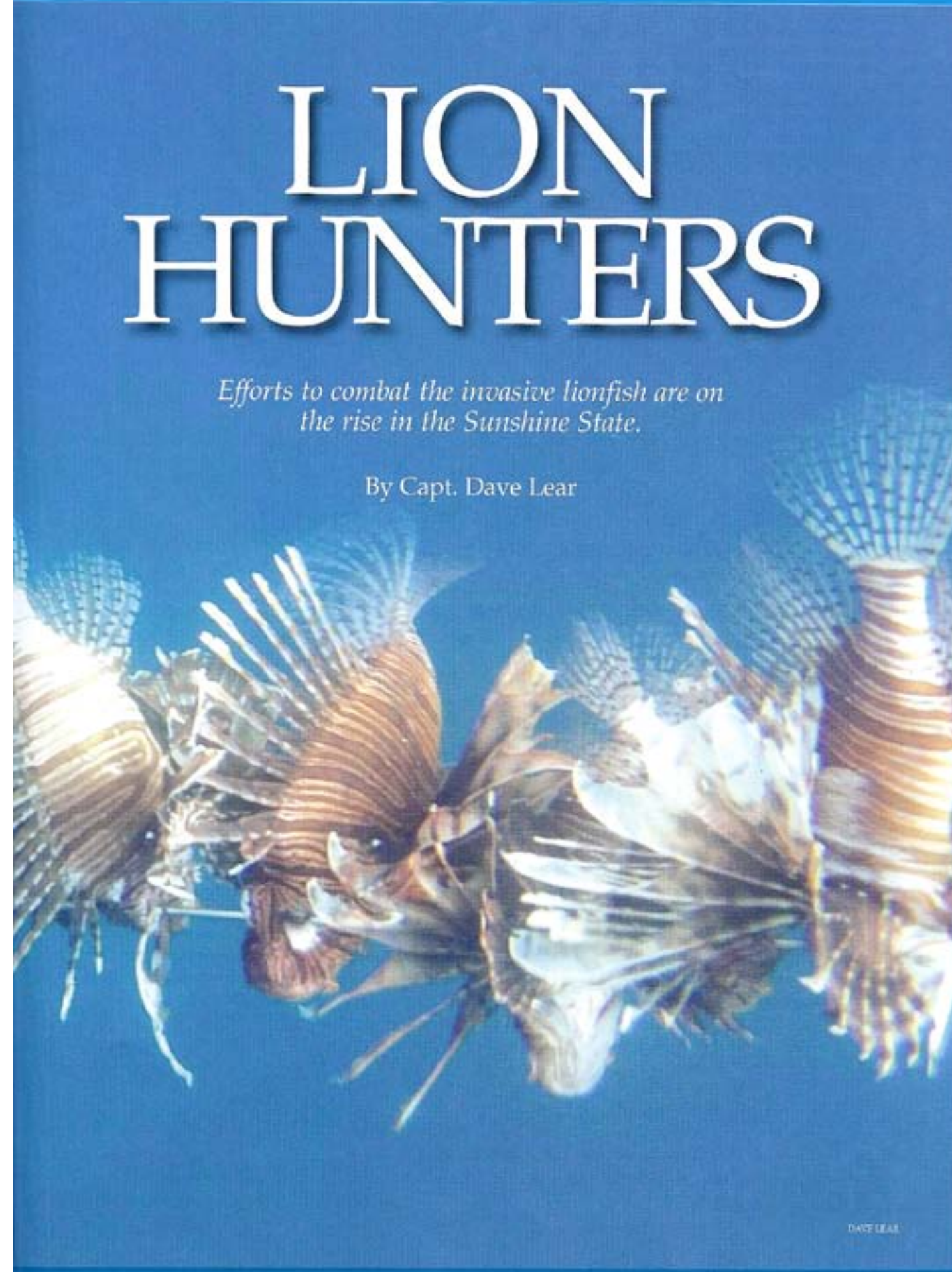


TIDE





LION HUNTERS

Efforts to combat the invasive lionfish are on the rise in the Sunshine State.

By Capt. Dave Lear

DAVE LEAR

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NLESS YOU'VE BEEN wandering the plains of Africa's Serengeti for the last couple of years, you've probably heard about the pesky lionfish. These colorful animals, recognized by their flowing fins that resemble the

manes of male lions, are native to the Indo-Pacific Oceans. But thanks to some careless or unfortunate saltwater aquarium owners, likely in South Florida, pet lionfish were released into the wild years ago. And that's where the problem took root.

With no natural predators, voracious appetites and the ability to breed faster than a jackrabbit, lionfish numbers exploded. They are now found regularly throughout the Caribbean and North Carolina, south on the

Atlantic coast, and on up to Rhode Island in the summer months. By 2011 they were established in the northern Gulf of Mexico and have since spread across to Texas. Lionfish can live in depths as deep as 700 feet or in the shallows near piers and jetties. There's very little scientific data for guidance. Biologists aren't sure how lionfish are kept in check in their native

environment or why grouper or sharks don't eat them here. No stock assessments have been done and population densities vary by habitat. What is known is that invasive lionfish grow bigger and with no enemies they can quickly decimate native fish around natural and artificial reefs.

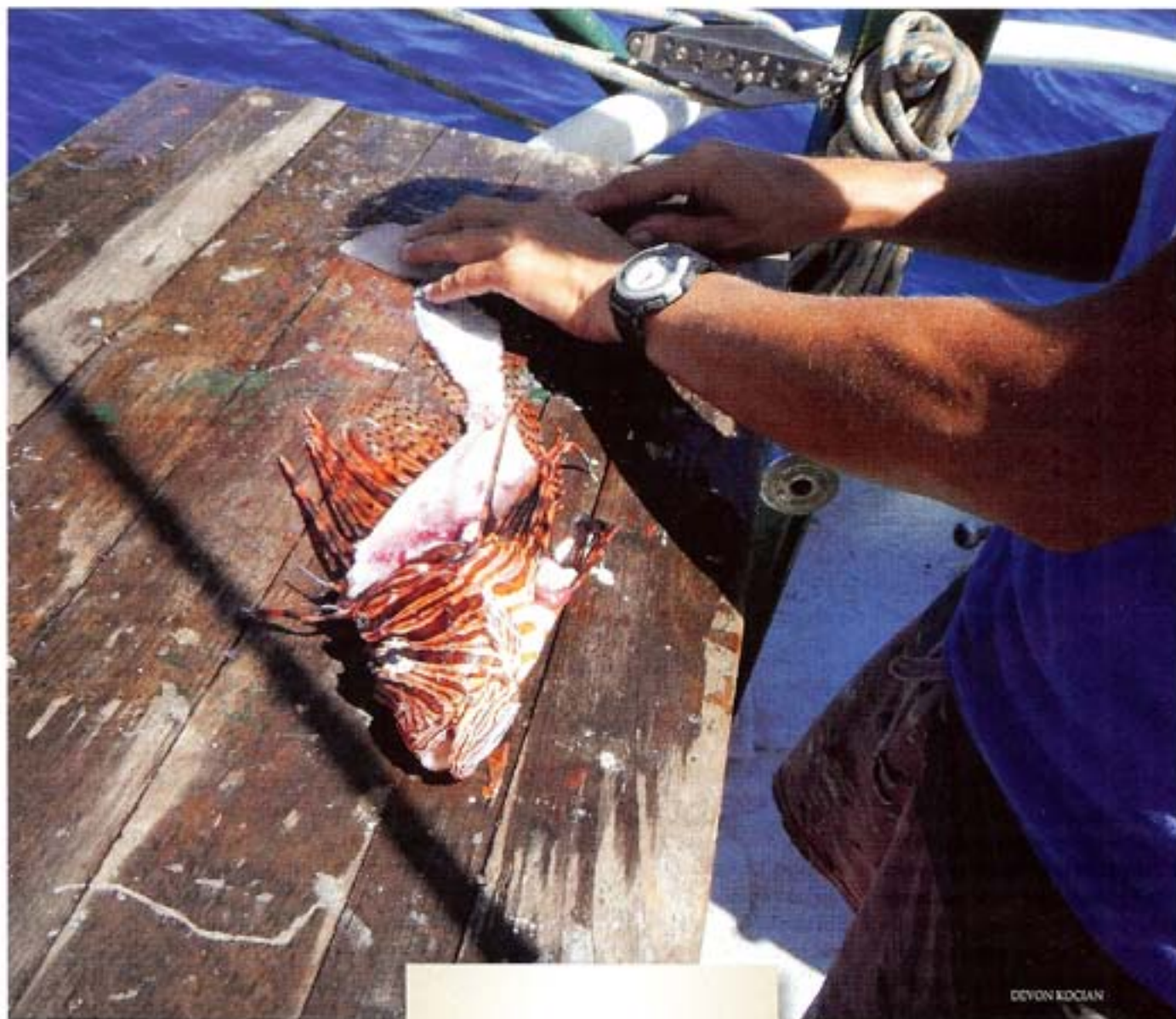
AQUATIC WAR DECLARED

In a move to eradicate as many as possible, it is open season year-round for lionfish in Florida waters, with no bag or size limits. You don't need a fishing license to harvest them with handheld pole spears or Hawaiian slings. Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is actively promoting public awareness of the issue and lionfish as a tasty seafood alternative. The combined efforts are starting to pay off.

"Last year there were 15 lionfish derbies that we tracked," says Meaghan Faletti, FWC's lionfish outreach coordi-

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nator. "So far this year, we know of more than 40 that are targeting lionfish specifically or have them eligible for prizes. Anglers can catch them on hook and line using live pinfish and shrimp, but the most effective means of harvest is by diving and spearfishing."

Faletti says lionfish tournaments, organized by teams or individual divers, typically reward prizes for the most fish brought in, the largest fish and the smallest too.

"We encourage the removal of all sizes," she explains. Prizes include dive gear, resort packages and sometimes cash. Tournaments range from single-day events to month-long contests with the average goal of harvesting 600 fish per day.

During the Gulf Coast Lionfish Round-Up last October in Pensacola, a dozen divers brought in 2,394 lionfish over a weekend. Another state-wide

Lionfish Awareness Day was held in May at sites throughout the state, including the epicenter in Pensacola, where marine artist Guy Harvey and celebrity chefs were in attendance.

"Our goals were to increase overall awareness, give demonstrations on filleting and cooking and, of course, removing as many lionfish from the water as possible," explains Amanda

Nalley, FWC's public information specialist. "We also launched the Reef Rangers program (reefrangers.com), a new local effort similar to Adopt a Highway, only this time it's an artificial reef. We've found that if local groups take responsibility for a reef throughout the year by removing lionfish, they can really have a positive impact on native wildlife and habitat."

Individual catches can be reported through the Florida lionfish app or online at MyFWC.com/Lionfish. Social media users can also post photos on Twitter and Instagram.

DEMAND SKYROCKETING

Besides the public campaign, good old American enterprise is fueling the slaughter. Fortunately, lionfish are very tasty and can be prepared a number of ways, which contributes to a growing seafood demand. (see the Asian Lionfish

Tostadas recipe on page 62). That takes pressure off native stocks and increases the incentive to harvest more. A \$50 saltwater products license is required to harvest commercially in Florida and a growing number of divers are cashing in. Capt. Grayson Shepard is an Apalachicola charter boat skipper who spears lionfish on the side.

"We find them around manmade stuff more than natural rocks or ledges," Shepard explains. "Some spots have hundreds of fish, others 10 to 15. I have a theory that the juveniles are carried up here by the Loop Current before they drop off and look for structure. Most of the bottom is barren sand so sunken shrimp boats and artificial reefs really attract them."

Grayson runs as far as 40 miles off-

money catching lionfish. But I am making enough that my dive hobby is paying for itself."

Grayson is not an isolated case. Known affectionately as the Lion Hunter, Rachel Bowman was "hooked" on lionfish harvesting after spearing one on her first dive in 2012. That enthusiasm quickly developed into her part-time business in the Florida Keys.

"The FWC is doing a lot of things to make commercial fishing of lionfish as easy as possible," Bowman says. "It's the only fish legal to harvest on a rebreather and you can also get special permits to take lionfish from marine sanctuaries. They're really encouraging people like me."

From her base in Marathon, Bowman dives several times a week to

rienced spear fishermen and when they go with me the amount of fish we can put on the boat is staggering. I'm in awe of those guys. The speed and proficiency that they can spear fish is amazing. It's like a violent ballet, they're so graceful and smooth."

Bowman is a cheerleader for lionfish consumption for altruistic reasons as well.

"I live in a tourist destination and I want to expose as many people to lionfish as possible. The reef is a nursery for the ocean," she said. "It's where the babies live, so we need to do all we can to protect those reefs. Besides, spearing lionfish allows me to be in the water every day. I haven't made a profit yet, but I am paying for tank fills, gas and my boat payment."

Bowman says the biggest hurdle to getting people to try lionfish is the misconception that they are poisonous. The spines are venomous, but careful handling mitigates any chance of accidents. Cleaning a lionfish is also daunting for some. Bowman says she filets them just like a bass or any other fish. And despite being a reef inhabitant, lionfish have never tested positive for the deadly ciguatera toxin, she adds.

"They are low in mercury levels and high in the Omega fatty acids that are so good for us," Bowman says. "Lionfish are one of the best fish to eat. They have the taste of hogfish and the texture of snapper, with mild, very flaky white meat that's sweet and delicious. And you cook them just like you would any other fish."

Sadly, invasive lionfish won't be extinct anytime soon. But thanks to a growing cadre of divers like Shepard and Bowman, as well as the seafood-loving public, their numbers are certainly dwindling. So grab a spear and slippers and join the hunt. Or simply raise a fork. Either way is part of the long-term solution. ▀

Capt. Dave Lear is an award-winning freelance writer and photographer whose byline appears regularly in TIDE, and other national fishing and outdoors magazines, plus tournament web sites. When not on assignment, Lear, a retired light-tackle guide, can be found poling Florida's Big Bend coastline in his custom skiff or exploring the tidal creeks by kayak.



shore to target sites from 100 to 140 feet deep. Good dives can yield as many as 300 fish of all sizes. For his labor, Shepard earns \$3 a pound at wholesale prices for uncleaned fish.

"Lionfish are absolutely delicious," he adds. "We have one restaurant that serves them whole, with the head on and it's a very attractive presentation. The demand is pretty high. People are calling up the seafood markets and asking for more once they've tried them. I don't expect to make any real

depths averaging 80 to 160 feet. Her catch is sold before it ever gets back to the dock and demand is skyrocketing. Bowman gets less than \$10 per pound for whole, un-gutted fish.

"My restaurants are texting me every day at 7 a.m. asking if I'm going out," she explains. "Plus I'm getting several new inquiries from other restaurants and markets each week. Most of the time I'm a one-woman operation doing four dives a day. I do have some buddies who are very expe-