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ENVIRONMENT

## Submarine is latest weapon to fight invasive lionfish

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The Antipodes sub which has escorted scientists on dives to observe lionfish in deep waters off Broward County this past week. OceanGate, Inc. / Courtesy photo

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BY SUSAN COCKING  
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Keene Haywood, adjunct professor at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School, took his first submarine ride Thursday 150 feet deep in the ocean off Broward County. Seated in the five-person Antipodes, Haywood found himself at the frontier of a burgeoning ecological problem: the spread of venomous, non-native lionfish to deep Atlantic waters where it's hard to kill them.

With the sub hovering just above the bottom, Haywood looked through the clear viewing dome to a sandy bottom strewn with old tires — and as many as eight adult lionfish “just hanging out by the tires,” he said.

“There was a small school of fish using the tires to hide, and the lionfish actually went for them,” Haywood said. “The lionfishes’ bellies looked full.”

Haywood was among a handful of scientists invited to observe southeast Florida's lionfish infestation first-hand Thursday and Friday by OceanGate, Inc., the company that built Antipodes and rents it out for research, filmmaking and commercial enterprises. OceanGate, based in Woodinville, Wash., near Seattle, is best known locally for its discovery last year of a World War II-era American fighter plane in 240 feet of water off Miami Beach.

Noticing that the Grumman F6F Hellcat was covered with as many as 30 lionfish, OceanGate CEO Stockton Rush began tinkering with a device designed to suck the Indo-Pacific predators through a tube into a holding tank in Antipodes. Rush figured it could be an effective tool for collecting them at depths too deep for scuba divers.

Although they didn't get to try out the new “slurp gun” during Thursday's plunge, Haywood and researchers from Nova Southeastern University Oceanographic Center in Hollywood (where the expedition was based), the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the NOAA National Marine Sanctuary program were intrigued by their observations of lionfish.

Haywood said he was interested in how the lionfish chose where to position themselves.

“The tires where the lionfish were, were higher and that definitely plays a role,” he said. “They can get out of the current, not expend a lot of energy and just feed.”

Steve Gittings, science coordinator for the National Marine Sanctuary program in Washington, D.C., made a similar observation. During his dive on Antipodes, the crew tried to reach the shipwreck Bill Boyd in 265 feet of water but was thwarted by the strong current. Instead, Gittings got to see lionfish hovering around a ghost trap on a sandy plain and also around some tires.

“The value of this dive is to show small lionfish and where they might like to inhabit,” Gittings said.

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"There's a lot of low habitat around. There's nothing to stop them from taking over if they can live on low habitat like that."

Calling the lionfish infestation "one of the worst things to hit the reef system in a long time," Gittings said he would like to find out just how deep the creatures can live — "if there's super-high abundance down deep or if there's some limit."

Previous research has shown lionfish can live in shallow estuaries only a few inches deep all the way out to 1,000 feet deep in the Bahamas. They love to chow down on native tropicals, reducing fish populations in some areas by as much as 80 percent.

Although scientists believe they were introduced here in the early 1990s, they didn't start showing up in force in southeast Florida and the Keys till about five years ago. State and federal fisheries managers and the non-profit Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) have encouraged anglers, divers and commercial trappers to harvest and eat lionfish. REEF hosts diving derbies with pri the FWC has declared a permanent open-season on the candy-striped predators.

Following sub dives on Thursday and Friday, researchers attended a lionfish seminar 5 oceanographic center featuring panel discussions and a cooking/dining event.

Many scientists believe the lionfish invasion in the Atlantic, Gulf and Caribbean is too fa species to be eradicated. But they are looking for ways to control the spread.

Said Haywood: "This is the new normal. We're going to live with these things unless so happens."

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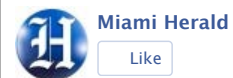
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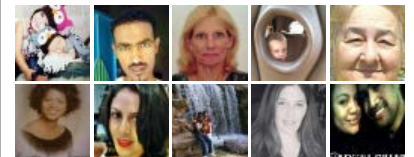
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