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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**Lionfish reported at Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary**  
*NOAA formulating response to invasive species threat, asks for help from public*

Lionfish, a venomous invasive marine species considered one of the top predators in many coral reef environments in the Atlantic, has been documented at NOAA's Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary — the first instance of the invader in the sanctuary since the species spread to U.S. East Coast waters in 2000.

Several juvenile lionfish, normally native to the Indo-Pacific, were spotted recently in the sanctuary, located 70 to 115 miles off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico. NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries is also tracking lionfish activity at Gray's Reef and Florida Keys national marine sanctuaries.

Lionfish consume important commercial fish and crustacean species in their juvenile stage – including snapper, grouper and shrimp, as well as other reef fish. For this reason, sanctuary resource managers and scientists are concerned about the potential impact lionfish could have on the coral reef ecosystem, which supports the tourism and fishing industries. Lionfish also have venomous spines, placing divers and fishermen at risk from their painful stings.

Recreational divers reported seeing a lionfish at West Flower Garden Bank on July 20 and a second fish at Stetson Bank on July 27. A sanctuary researcher found a third lionfish on August 3 at West Flower Garden Bank. That fish was captured and is in a tank at the sanctuary's Galveston office. Another lionfish was observed at East Flower Garden Bank on August 8.

"Although not unexpected, these reports are disturbing, and we intend to search for and document the presence of this species in sanctuary waters," said George Schmahl, sanctuary superintendent. "We are developing a strategy to address the potential threat this highly-invasive species could have on the sanctuary's native populations."

As the sanctuary formulates its response, the diving and fishing public is encouraged to report sightings and locations of lionfish to the sanctuary office, by phone at 409-621-5151, ext. 114. The information will be used to track the progress and impacts of the invasion, and enable responders to focus their removal efforts. The public can also help track the invasion by submitting reports to the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (<http://www.reef.org/programs/exotic/lionfish>), and the United States Geological Survey (<http://nas.er.usgs.gov/SightingReport.aspx>).

NOAA's Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary protects 56 square miles of critical marine habitat in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico. The coral reefs and coral-sponge communities support a variety of recreationally and commercially important species, including snappers, groupers, sea turtles, manta rays and sharks.

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**On the Web:**

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary: <http://flowergarden.noaa.gov>  
NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries: <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov>

NOAA's Lionfish website: <http://www.ccfhr.noaa.gov/stressors/lionfish.aspx>