

**Our World Underwater Scholarship Society
Final Intern Report**

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REEF Intern Summer 2005

Table of Contents

Internship Report.....	Page 3
Appendix A.....	Page 8
Internship Photographs.....	Please see included slide show

My participation in the Our World Underwater Scholarship Society Internship program with the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) has been an amazing experience. I cannot thank the Society enough for giving me this opportunity.

George Wozencraft informed me shortly before my college graduation that I had received this internship with REEF in Key Largo Florida. I was absolutely overjoyed at the idea of spending three months in the Florida Keys, who wouldn't be? But what was REEF? I knew I had been a member since I became certified in '97, but I was embarrassed to say I had no idea what REEF did. So the first thing I did was check out the REEF web page, which says:

REEF was founded in 1990, out of growing concern about the health of the marine environment, and the desire to provide the SCUBA diving community a way to contribute to the understanding and protection of marine populations. REEF achieves this goal primarily through its volunteer fish monitoring program, the REEF Fish Survey Project. Participants in the Project not only learn about the environment they are diving in, but they also produce valuable information. Scientists, marine park staff, and the general public use the data that are collected by REEF volunteers.

It certainly sounded interesting, but I was eager to learn what exactly I'd be doing for REEF.

George then put me into with Lad Akins. Lad is the Executive Director of REEF and as I was about to find out an extremely kind and helpful person. Because REEF already had two interns set up for the summer and the REEF trailer could only accommodate two people, I needed to find my own housing for my time in Key Largo. Which posed a problem since I was still in Maine finishing school. Thankfully Lad was immensely helpful with this, when I found a place that I thought I might like in the classifieds, Lad drove and check it out, even sending me photos of the places!

As fate would have it a distant family friend was moving down to Key Largo at the end of June. That still left three weeks however, from when I arrived in Key Largo until I could move into my new house. Lad came to the

rescue again; this time he told me I could stay in his parent's mobile home on his front yard! So I packed up my life and made the drive from Lewiston, Maine to Key Largo, Florida.

On the day I arrived I went into the REEF office to meet everyone. Three other interns were there; Nia who was from York, England and was going to graduate school at the end of the summer, Skyler who was going to be a senior at the University of Miami and Joe, who was going to be a junior at the University of Miami. Nia and Sky were living in the intern trailer and Joe was living in his parent's condo down the road. I also met the REEF staff; Lad, who I had been talking to, Joe who is the Field Operations Coordinator and Bryan Dias, the Director of Outreach and Education. Then I followed Lad to his home and moved some of my stuff into the mobile home.

Over the coming weeks I learned how a small nonprofit works. REEF has 30,000+ members; four permanent staff members and thankfully a faithful group of volunteers and of course, the interns. As a REEF intern it was my job, along with the other interns, to answer emails and the phone, fill orders for REEF gear and survey materials, make the daily post office runs, make sure that the need supplies and materials are re-ordered, manage the members in the member database and be general support for the REEF staff. As a benefit the REEF field stations in the area (dive shops that support REEF) provide free diving to REEF interns conducting survey dives.

The normal day began with checking the emails for new orders, then filling those orders and getting them ready to be shipped, new members needed to be added and member addresses updated. Then anything else the staff needed would also need to be done, such as processing and error checking member surveys. What REEF does is absolutely amazing, people from all over the Western Hemisphere conduct surveys while diving or snorkeling in which they write down all of the fish they see and can positively identify along with their abundance. Next they mail them into REEF and we error check them and

have them scanned into the database. There are over 85,000 surveys in the database and groups like NOAA and the National Marine Sanctuaries, among many others, routinely use REEF data.

My first REEF dive was quite an experience. Although I'd been a diver for over 7 years, logged over 250 dives and reached PADI Divemaster, I wasn't exactly the best at identifying fish. I was just used to what most people do while diving, looking around and checking things out. Luckily I was diving with a previous REEF intern, Danyel, nine out of ten times when I pointed to something underwater to ask her what it was, she'd know. It was a great dive, and by the second one I had a handle on how to keep track of not losing my slate/underwater paper, fish ID book or Velcro pencil.

When we got to the office the next day we filled out our scan forms. These are the forms that divers and snorkelers transfer their sightings to so that we can just scan them using a computer. For the Caribbean, or Tropical Western Atlantic, as it's called at REEF there is also online data entry where you simply click on the abundances of the fish you've seen. After we process the data it gets posted on the web and you can view your own data (See Appendix A)!

Shortly after I arrived Bryan and REEF hosted the first annual REEF Educators Advisory Committee meeting. Six educators from across the country came to Key Largo, along with numerous other people from NOAA, the National Marine Sanctuary, Island Dolphin Care and the John G. Shedd Aquarium. This meeting was set up to discuss how to improve REEF's education program. In particular a NOAA grant REEF had recently received to develop 3 lesson plans for high school students. I was put in charge of helping Bryan get everything set up, and to be the secretary for the meeting. It was nice to have a break from office work, and I even got to go diving with the group. Some really interesting things came out of the meeting and afterwards I was put in charge of not only typing up the notes and such from the meeting, but also developing the lesson plans with the committee.

One of the other responsibilities I was given was getting REEF ready to participate in the Celebration of the Seas. We had a booth at this first annual music and film festival and I was responsible of communicating with the organizers and getting all of our material together along with staffing the booth. REEF was also presented with an award at the event.

Also in July Paul Humann, one of the founders of REEF, and the author of numerous fish identification books held his annual Discovery Tour week in Key Largo. During the Discovery Tour Paul goes diving with and teach fish identification along with numerous other things to the divers participating. As a REEF intern I was invited to join in on the diving and the classes, which I did. It was quite an experience to learn fish identification from the man who literally wrote the book on it.

At the end of the Discovery tour REEF hosted it's annual Sustainers Event. There was an office open house, which we interns cleaned and set up for, and a reception at one of the member's houses. The reception was really fun, we got dressed up (well dressed up for the Keys), there was a band and Christy and Brice Semmens made presentations on the work that REEF had been doing for the past year. Lad also gave out the volunteer of the year award.

I also got to attend a REEF board meeting. This gave me an even better look at the inner workings of a non-profit organization and who all these people on the REEF board are. Everyone gave reports and we talked about things such as the education meeting, and the course curriculums. I also got a chance to meet Ned DeLoach and his wife Anne, the other founders of REEF and co-authors on many of Paul's books. And since the meeting was held at Paul's house I was able to see his amazing collection of photographs from around the world and his magnificent garden.

Another part of the REEF internship is volunteering for other organization. In particular I've done most of my work with Biscayne National park in Homestead. I taught I REEF fish ID course for their Great Annual Fish

Count Event, volunteered seining for bonefish, and measuring lobsters caught during mini season. I hope to continue volunteering with them for the remainder of my stay in Key Largo.

As I came to spend more time in the office and away from the office with the other interns and staff I realized how lucky I was to be living and working in a community as kind, caring and fun as REEF and Key Largo. And did I mention the free diving? Through my time here I have progressed to a level 3 surveyor and plan on taking my level 4/5 exam (expert level) before the end of September.

In the beginning of August Nia, Joe and Sky all went back to their lives outside of REEF and due to the fact that one of the next interns accepted another job, I will be the only REEF intern until the end of September. In October I am going home to Chicago for a week to give an introduction to REEF talk at my old dive club, the Chicago Aquanauts and to teach a REEF fish ID course.

I have enjoyed my time here so much that I am actually planning on staying through until at least the end of December. I cannot say express my gratitude enough to the REEF staff, other interns for making my time here so wonderful and especially to the Society members for funding this internship.