



CAN-099-Coral After the hurrican-Florida

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Coral after the hurricane

Divers looking at coral reefs after Irma didn't expect what they saw down below

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Divers making survey inspections of Key Largo's coral reefs and shipwrecks soon after Hurricane Irma came back smiling.

"The reefs look spectacular, compared to what we thought they would look like," said Billy Wise, general manager for Rainbow Reef Dive Center in Key Largo.

"We're super optimistic about the reefs," Wise said. "We had seven boats out Saturday. Everybody I talked to at the dock was positive and said everything looks great."

About two dozen divers from Rainbow Reef checked corals at Molasses Reef, Grecian Rocks, the Christ of the Abyss statue and French Reef.

"Some of the reefs have gotten deeper because sand moved," Wise said. "It's a little like diving a new site."

"I was expecting to see more dead sea fans, but it seems like most of them came through OK."

Near the World War II wreck of the freighter Benwood, the storm uncovered an anchored that had been buried in sand for decades.

"That was an incredible find," Wise said. "It's as cool looking as anything."

On the shipwreck reef Duane, a retired U.S. Coast Guard cutter, a top section of a smokestack was removed by the hurricane. "It kind of make it more interesting," Wise said.

Other shipwrecks, including the big *Spiegel Grove* wreck that was rolled upright by a weaker storm, appear to be in tact.

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“All in all, we’re ready and happy to be letting visitors come back in,” Wise said. “We want to let people know that not everything is negative.

“We have a great staff of 70 and we want to keep them here and working,” he said. “People are going to be curious about what’s happening on the reef, and that will help rebuild the Keys economy.”

Rainbow Reef and other Upper Keys shops helped remove some debris from canals and the ocean bottom. “We found a refrigerator floating by about a mile offshore,” Wise said.

Reports from dive shops in the Middle and Lower Keys, more hard-hit by Irma, were pending.

Cece Roycraft of Dive Key West said many dive operators have been focused on repairs before focusing on booking trips.

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“It will be a week or so before we take customers out,” Roycraft said. “Our boat is fine, but the store had some damage. Hurricane Wilma was far worse for us, though

Staff with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is “assessing the impact of Hurricane Irma to our underwater environment,” Superintendent Sarah Fangman said in a statement.

“The Category 4 storm caused serious damage on land and, undoubtedly, created changes in the waters surrounding the Florida Keys. ... We urge caution for those going on and in the water. Many waterways are littered with sunken boats and other debris.”

[**UM researchers seed coral reefs off Key Biscayne**](#)

A team of researchers and students are planting branches clipped from a coral nursery off Key Biscayne.

Pedro Portal Miami Herald

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A boat from Rainbow Reef Dive Center moors above the ‘Benwood’ shipwreck to check the dive site after Hurricane Irma. **Jack W. Fishman** Rainbow Reef Dive Center

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