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Connect & Protect: Enjoy Voluntourism Activities in the Florida Keys

FLORIDA KEYS — Visitors and seasonal “snowbirds” who want to do something good or add an enriching element to their next Florida Keys vacation can find area charities and nonprofit organizations dedicated to protecting and improving environmental quality — and human and animal life — that seek volunteers throughout the year.

Here are some easy tips for enjoying a sustainable sojourn in the Keys.

Apply a “reduce, reuse and recycle” philosophy while on vacation and make a difference. Grab reusable bags (or ask for paper) when stocking up on vacation rental home groceries and goodies — and join Keys groups and residents in skipping plastic straws at eateries and watering holes.

When dining out, order lionfish whenever it’s offered on the menu. Why? Because this invasive species, whose population is exploding, preys on over 70 species of native fish in the Keys and also competes with them for food. Lionfish have a light, delicious flavor and can be savored in everything from sushi and ceviche to lusciously sauced dishes — making it a pleasure to practice “conservation through consumption.”

Recreational divers and snorkelers can participate in undersea coral restoration efforts in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. From Key Largo to Key West, “citizen scientists” are joining researchers and trained scientists with the Coral Restoration Foundation and Mote Marine Laboratory to help with the outplanting of reef-building species of coral — steadily restoring endangered corals by replanting new growths from coral nurseries to the reef. There are also land-based and surface support volunteer activities for non-divers.

Volunteering is a great way to meet Keys residents ready to share their passion for, and insights into, their home. Beach, shoreline and mangrove forest cleanups are popular among standup paddleboarders and kayakers. Spend time working in a wildlife refuge, or connect with other causes and charities that are dedicated to protecting and improving the quality of life in the Keys.

Just visit fla-keys.com/voluntourism/ and choose the one that matters most to you.

Finally, the “10 Keymandments” are practical and easy for everyone to follow in protecting the Keys environment:

ONE: Plant a coral (or adopt one of the cute little things, but don't touch them on the reef).

TWO: Support the wildlife (volunteer food, funds or time to a local wild bird center).

THREE: Take out the trash (especially if it’s floating in the water).

FOUR: Capture a lionfish (any time and any size — we can show you how).

FIVE: Leave a digital footprint (share pictures with fans, friends and followers).

SIX: Hike it, bike it or hoof it (it's low on eco-impact and high on fresh tropical air).

SEVEN: Catch dinner (and release all the fish you know you can't eat).

EIGHT: Use a mooring buoy at dive sites (save your back and leave the anchor alone).

NINE: Conserve vs. consume (reduce, reuse and recycle even on vacation).

TEN: Get off the beaten path (you can hike, bike, walk, kayak or paddleboard along Keys trails).

Eco-conscious residents and visitors can practice a culture of conservation as they eat, drink, sleep, swim, explore and play above, on and beneath the waters surrounding the Florida Keys. It's an ideal way to help protect the 125-mile island chain's priceless natural resources.

Florida Keys green travel information: fla-keys.com/greentravel

Florida Keys visitor information: fla-keys.com or 1-800-FLA-KEYS

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