

## A TRIP WORTH TAKING

On Friday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, Captain Donald Voss, Operations Director of Marine Cleanup Initiative, Inc. (MCII), loaded 16 divers and 5 bubble watchers onto a Midnight Sun bus sponsored by Open Water Products President Jack Hudson, and headed to Tavernier, Florida to the Coral Restoration Foundation (CRF).

In December, Captain Don attended a National Geographic seminar regarding the Blue Ocean Project. Local Scientist, Dr. Brian Lapointe and others spoke on the damage done to Florida's coral in the 1990's after the waters and bloom coming from the Snake River Slough engulfed the Keys and killed 90% of the coral. Andy Northrop of Coral Restoration Foundation spoke of the coral growth and successes this foundation is having in extending new coral areas. However, he mentioned that they do not have enough help to complete their task before their grant runs out in July 2011. Captain Voss pulled Andy aside and offered to bring a bus of divers down if that might be of any assistance. Thus this partnership was formed.

Marine Cleanup Initiative then set about to find sponsors and volunteers who might give of their own to help our reefs and plant some coral. Jack Hudson, a local Fort Pierce man who invents safety products, stepped forward and asked if he could provide the bus and attend the event. The Subway Shop on Seaway Drive provided food for the trip on the way down. Harbor Branch provided water for the trip and dive. Otherwise, divers paid their own way to attend this vital planting.

As Fort Pierce's Redevelopment Director, Jon Ward works with local groups to more extensively establish an Ecotourism Board and Industry. MCII gathered divers not only from Fort Pierce but also from Juno Beach's Loggerhead Marine Life Center, Sebastian, Cleveland, and San Francisco, to join in Fort Pierce to travel south to save Florida's precious reefs.

Since December, Andy was replaced at CRF by Kevin Gaines, a Vero Beach resident and another passionate supporter of our oceans. Along with Dan Dawson of Horizon Dive Center and the Key West Inn of Tavernier, the trip was arranged and it was fantastic. There was not a single hitch in this rapidly staged event as every one of these organizations is totally professional. Rooms were around \$120.00. Diving was \$56.00 per dive. Entrance to the Coral Garden is \$25 per day. The bus was \$100 per person.

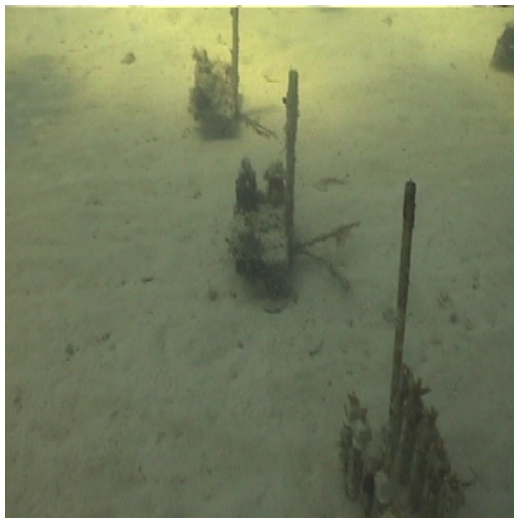
Saturday morning all volunteers attended a lecture and briefing session at the Holiday Inn a short distance down the road where the volunteers were educated with the information Captain Don heard about in December. The mid-morning session was a hands-on training class held out of water yet simulating the cleaning process and layout of the coral garden. The afternoon was filled with a two tank dive to prepare coral "plugs" for transplanting the next day.

The growing process has evolved over the years as a result of differing conditions such as the cold spells of the last few years. Coral is generally very sensitive to temperature and water clarity issues and many baby corals died from those cold spells. Also, as processes changed, different shapes and techniques were employed. Volunteers absorbed all in preparation for the event.

Captain Don had a two sided reason for heading to Tavernier. Habitat restoration is a large part of the stipulations of the NOAA grant MCII has received and it is important to learn any and all techniques out there. Training and certification for Marine Debris and Habitat Restoration are a large part of the grant process, as is the education of divers and citizens.

And then the second side... and this is where Ft Pierce comes into play. It is widely believed that coral formations do not traditionally exist north of Jupiter, Florida due to water temperature, yet MCII volunteers, some lifelong local divers, state they know of stands of coral in our area. Kevin Gaines became very excited to learn this and asked that we document this coral as to depth and species and report this back to CRF. If our coral matches, this might be a way to strengthen the gene pool with coral more resistant to colder waters.

Sunday, another class and training session was held to teach the actual process for transplanting the coral from the garden to Molasses Reef to re-establish the coral there.



*Rows of coral babies waiting to be transplanted using the original solid base system.*



*CRF has developed a line hanging system as used in black pearl farms to allow better circulation of nutrients.*



*Baby corals, once cleaned and prepared, are carefully collected, placed in bins and rapidly transported to their new permanent home on Molasses Reef. Care is taken to keep them out of the sand (used here to support the babies) and to keep them covered in salt water during this critical phase. This day there were 4 foot seas, therefore challenging.*



*A baby planted on the reef with ID tag next to it.*



*Here, now underwater, the same babies are waiting to be planted.*

Once transported, a two part epoxy is used to secure the corals, three different genotypes grouped together, to use as a monitoring and research process. A plaque ID'ing this information is places by each genotype.

Although the work was labor-intense and the conditions were less than stellar, MCII divers worked in four 4-person teams to place and secure all the babies and then took a few minutes to enjoy the reef and the life there. The knowledge learned will return with us to Ft Pierce for promotion of our marine life.

The entire trip and demand to attend the next trip has caused MCII to start looking for additional sponsors and a good date that works for CRF. MCII will start their spring operations soon, working to remove 17 derelict vessels as well as fulfilling obligations to South Florida Water Management District's Snook Plate Grant Program who is funding lagoon cleanup from Ft Pierce City Marine to St Lucie Inlet and the ongoing NOAA grant that continues to fund the cleanup from Sebastian Inlet to Ft Pierce City Marina. Without these funds, MCII would not be able to continue this valuable work of debris removal and habitat restoration.



*Team Yellow works together cleaning spaces to plant three genotypes with plaques to be monitored and followed through Coral Restoration Foundation's Adopt a Reef Program.*

*A company can adopt a section of Molasses Reef for \$5000 from CRF and then follow the progress of their garden. Talk about Ecotourism!!!*



*Water Warriors from Open Water Products, Loggerhead Marine Life Center, Coral Restoration Foundation and Marine Cleanup Initiative, Inc. after the final day of our coral planting adventure.*

The story would only be half told if I did not take a few minutes to mention the marine life and their interest in our efforts. On the first dive, fish seemed to stay at arms length. There are many cleaning stations in this garden. A cleaning station is a place where shrimps and small fish assist larger fish. Cleaning station fish, which have a symbiotic relationship with larger fish, climb onto large fish and eat parasites from their mouths and body. This must be a very relaxing process because the larger fish appear to be most docile during these times. It is unique that

there appears to be no fear or cheating when the shrimps and crabs at these stations crawl in and out of their mouths and all over these fish.

When first we appeared, fish of all sizes were nervous and kept their distance. As we cleaned and worked and moved into our second tank dive, the nervous period ended. I had small shrimps crawl onto my arm and wait there while I cleaned the coral groves. Small wrasses and grunts would swim in and around my hands snatching up any food matter available to help in the effort. Our experiences on the reef the next day were similar. As soon as coral was secured, tiny tropicals came out of nowhere to investigate and see if they had found a new home. We had turtles and rays and hog snappers cruise on through the area checking out what was happening. Men using picks and chisels must be rare underwater. It was all just too overwhelming.

None of this would have been possible without the help of the volunteers and the kind infusions from our sponsors. Thanks to everyone and especially to Coral Restoration Foundation for the great work they are doing. Our next trip will be mid-May, so call and save a space for this unique experience.

**We have May 6-8 or May 20-22 available for another Tavernier trip if space is available.**

Captain Don  
Operations Director  
Marine Cleanup Initiative, Inc.