

US-Cuba sea mission finds healthy reefs, invasive lionfish

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A joint U.S.-Cuban expedition to explore the island's coral reefs uncovered a surprisingly healthy ecosystem and large schools of mackerel with significant commercial value, scientists involved in the mission said Tuesday.

The study also found alarmingly high numbers of invasive lionfish, which is not native to the Western Hemisphere and has become a growing marine menace in recent years.

"We found an incredible amount of diversity, especially in algae and sponges, and the reefs were in incredible health as well," said Patricia Gonzalez of the Marine Investigations Center at the University of Havana. "Some of the most fascinating results have to do with widespread coral coverage, in some cases up to 70 and 80 percent ... and some species we believe are new."

The preliminary findings came from an expedition aboard a boat that sailed more than 1,400 nautical miles around Cuba in May and June.

Scientists said the mission was made possible by the restoration of diplomatic relations between Havana and Washington two years ago under then-President Barack Obama and his Cuban counterpart, Raul Castro.

It was a result of an agreement signed in 2015 between the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. National Park

Service and Cuba's Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment.

Florida Atlantic University provided technology aboard the boat that allowed specialists to observe [coral reefs](#) at a depth of over 200 feet (60 meters), participants said.

Scientists predicted such cooperative ventures will continue despite current President Donald Trump's new policy toward the communist-run country, which would prohibit most new American transactions with Cuban military-linked businesses and restrict some U.S. travel to the island.

"Environment and science are two issues that everyone can agree on," said Dan Whittle of the Environmental Defense Fund. "It's fairly apolitical, and if you look into the Trump National Security Directive, there's a line in there that identifies science and the environment as one area of engagement that will continue."

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