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**Aquarius Aquanauts Study Fish Life in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary
Science Team Works in Marine Protected Area While Living Underwater for ten days**

Key Largo, FL -- Beginning August 19, the Aquarius undersea laboratory will be home to a six person crew who will use underwater transmitters and receivers and fish census techniques to gather important information about conditions in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS). The FKNMS is one of a growing number of marine protected areas (MPAs) in the United States that are recognised as an important management tool for the conservation of marine wildlife populations.

MPAs are seen as a feasible way to help slow the decline of fish populations and catches, they help conserve critical habitats and biodiversity, and they are also used to manage sites to avoid conflicts among fishers, boaters, and divers. Despite growing recognition of their importance, many aspects of MPA design, management, and relationships to other conservation measures, require additional study to further support the implementation of science-based policy and management. The current Aquarius mission is specifically dedicated to the study of MPAs and fish populations.

Aquarius is an undersea laboratory where scientists live and work on the seafloor for extended periods using a special technique called saturation diving. The underwater laboratory, 12-feet by 43-feet in size and weighing 80 tons, is located in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, 60 feet underwater, and 3.5 miles offshore. Owned by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and operated by the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW), Aquarius is the world's only undersea research laboratory dedicated to understanding the condition of our oceans.

This month's Aquarius mission will support two research groups. Dr. James Lindholm (NOAA's Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary and the National Undersea Research Center at the University of Connecticut) will saturate this month as part of an effort to deploy one of the world's largest acoustic fish tracking networks. Several dozen acoustic receivers (hydrophones) and up to 80 fish (focusing on yellowtail snapper and black grouper) will be tagged with specially coded pingers to monitor their movements over the next year. Lindholm will be joined by Sarah Fangman (NOAA's Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary). The second research project is led by Dr. Steven Smith (U. of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences). Smith, and aquanauts Mike Feeley and Rick Gomez (U. of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences), will conduct high resolution fish censuses from Aquarius during the ten day mission. Their data will be used to help calibrate the region's largest and longest running (over 20 years) fish census program. Together, these two programs represent cutting-edge research that will help scientists and managers evaluate the status of fishery resources in the sanctuary and the relationship between MPAs and the biology of two economically important fish species. Joining the scientists are two NURC/UNCW habitat technicians, Thor Dunmire and Russell Lounsbury, who provide operational support for the mission along with the expert topside team led by Craig Cooper.

The August mission will feature a visit by six Girl Scouts, winners of a nation-wide writing contest. National Geographic TV (cable) will also film during the mission. During each Aquarius mission, expedition journals, photos, and live undersea webcam views are available, along with detailed information about other Aquarius programs. For more information, visit the Aquarius website at: <http://www.uncwil.edu/nurc/aquarius>.