

## Busted on the Banks

Story by PAI Dana Warr, D7 Public Affairs

MIAMI -- Since the late 1800's and the signing of the Fur Seal Act in 1897, the Coast Guard has played a vital role in enforcing natural resource laws. The signing of the Executive Orders on Coral Reefs and Marine Protected Areas, the passing of the Ocean Act of 2000 and the Pew Oceans Commission's report in 2005, have put Coast Guard members in the position to be stewards of the sea and become an integral part in the protection of the ocean within the exclusive economic zone of our nation.

During January, Coast Guardsmen stationed on the Cutter *Bluefin*, homeported in Fort Pierce, Fla., and Station Miami Beach, Fla., made two separate and significant seizures enforcing federal marine regulations.

A crew from Station Miami Beach was conducting recreational vessel safety checks near Crandon Park Marina on Key Biscayne, Fla., Jan. 18 and discovered approximately 350 pounds of live coral on board a 23-foot vessel.

Realizing a possible violation of a protected species law, the crew called for assistance from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission which issues permits to possess live coral rock.

According to The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council the Coral, Coral Reef and Live/Hard Bottom Habitat Plan prohibits harvest of stony corals, sea fans, coral reefs and live rock except as authorized for scientific and educational purposes.

FWC law enforcement personnel arrived at the Crandon Park Marina and took the lone man on the boat into custody for further investigation.

"It's a very serious offense, especially considering the fragile state of the coral in South Florida," said Officer Jorge Pino, a law enforcement officer for the FWC. "There's a black market for live coral but I don't know how much the 350 pounds may be worth. You have to have a special permit to harvest coral, and we don't issue them very regularly. This gentleman appears to have pulled them up illegally."

Only 10 days later, the crew of the *Bluefin* was patrolling the Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern and boarded the 77-foot shrimping vessel, *The Shootist*, after it was located operating within the 300 square-miles of prohibited ocean off Central Florida.

With the assistance of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, and their vessel monitoring system, the vessel was determined to be shrimping illegally in the restricted zone.

The vessel monitoring system works so well, says Petty Officer 3rd Class Cory Callahan, a boarding officer on the *Bluefin*, it allows the Coast Guard to use resources in one place while using other agencies' resources to monitor sensitive or prohibited areas elsewhere.

Before the Coast Guard even boarded the vessel, the master of *The Shootist* stated he was carrying 10,000 pounds of rock shrimp. Fishing for, or possession of, rock shrimp within Oculina Banks is strictly prohibited by law.

The vessel was escorted into Fort Pierce where the catch was seized by NOAA law enforcement officers. The catch was sold to a local fish market at fair market value and the money put into an escrow account until NOAA could conduct a formal investigation and determine innocence or guilt.

“Without the working relationship between NOAA and the Coast Guard we wouldn't have the continued success of fisheries enforcement in the Oculina Banks,” said Capt. Michael Jett, chief of law enforcement for the Coast Guard's Seventh District.

The enforcement of living marine resources continues to remain one of the top priorities for the Coast Guard. These two seizures of protected species is a shining example of what the Coast Guard asks of its people.

With the increase of National Marine Sanctuaries from two to 14 since 1982 and the Executive Order signed on June 15, 2006 creating the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Monument, establishing the largest marine protected area in the world, the Coast Guard, along with state and other federal agencies will remain at the forefront as the protectors of our nation's living marine resources.

**USCG**