

How to Tread Lightly While Adventuring in the Florida Keys

by Tracy Beard

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Like a string of beads on a delicate thread cast upon the sea, the allure of the Florida Keys can not be untangled from its fragility. The islands, made of coral and limestone owe their existence to sea levels that dropped thousands of years ago. To this day, weather, climate change and encroaching human activity continue to shape the Keys' natural environment. Unfortunately, this includes the dramatic erosion and stressing of its delicate coral ecosystems which attract divers, snorkellers, pleasure craft and holidaymakers – like myself.

Why should we care about coral?

A healthy coral reef is synonymous with a prosperous well-functioning city providing its marine residents with food, housing and sheltered places to gather. Coral reefs are one of the most biologically diverse and economically valuable ecosystems in the world. They afford income for local economies and provide a unique draw for tourists and recreation.

When damaged, these underwater “cities” quickly turn into ghost towns, offering nothing to anyone or anything.

For this reason, it's imperative that visitors tread lightly, even actively participating in the renewed health of marine ecosystems. Luckily, the introduction of sustainable programming in the Keys has made it easy for visitors to help.

On a recent visit, I welcomed an education in ecotourism. First, I learned about Blue Star, a program that helps travellers select charters and tour operators committed to promoting responsible and sustainable diving, snorkeling and fishing practices. Meanwhile, The Coral Restoration Foundation is dedicated to aiding the reefs’ natural recovery process and to educating people about the importance of the ocean and its resources. This large-scale project encompasses cultivation, outplanting and monitoring genetically diverse reef-building corals.

Truly, there’s no better way to enjoy the marine wonders of the Florida Keys than by taking to the water. Here are five ways eco-minded travellers can tread lightly while adventuring in the Keys.

Snorkel in Key Largo

John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park runs approximately 40 kilometres adjacent to the Keys and 4.8 kilometres east into the Atlantic Ocean. Coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangrove swamps attract visitors to the park and snorkeling is an exhilarating way to view this area’s underwater world. Before jumping into the teal-blue water, my boat captain reminds us to wear biodegradable, reef-safe sunscreen. We were instructed not to touch or take anything.

Nurture Sea Turtles in Marathon

A visit to the [Turtle Hospital](#) on Marathon provides an insider look at how the world's only licensed veterinary hospital dedicated to the treatment of sea turtles rescues, rehabilitates and releases injured sea turtles. The staff at this working hospital walk guests through their daily routines and explain how they work with legislators to create a cleaner and safer marine environment. At the end of the educational tours, guest can help feed the turtles.



Sailing in Islamorada

Captain Bill Todd and his wife Ellen operate Casa Morada Tours. They provide a wealth of entertaining information on how to responsibly enjoy the Keys on their personalized sailing, snorkeling and ecotours. I

enjoyed a sunset sail on Sol Sister, Casa's 10-metre classic skipjack sailboat.

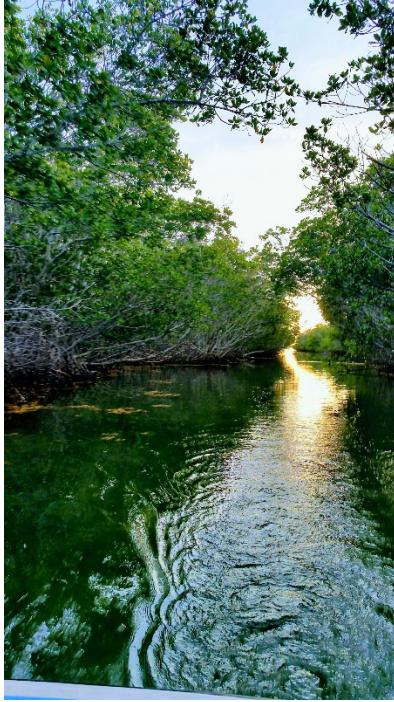
“The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary encompasses the entire Keys. Efforts to reverse the decades of damage by re-seeding the reef with corals and repairing the Everglades watershed continue,” explained Captain Bill. “I have seen new strains of natural hybrid corals flourishing, an increase of black spiny sea urchins, conches, groupers and others. Much more work remains, but if we choose to protect, preserve and nurture it, Mother Ocean will provide us with what we need.”

Observe Wildlife in Big Pine Key & The Lower Keys

Key deer

Big Pine Key is the perfect place to amble along interpretive trails to observe local wildlife. The visitor center at the National Key Deer Refuge offers a wealth of information about local events, outdoor activities and where to spot those adorable, tiny Key deer, a species totally unique to the island. A few miles north of the visitor center is a paved trail leading to the Blue Hole Observation Platform. Standing on this platform, you overlook the freshwater pool that was once an old limestone quarry. Keep your eyes peeled for American alligators, osprey, green herons and other birds that now call this re-wilded place their home.

To spot wildlife of the marine variety in The Lower Keys, venture offshore with a Blue Star-designated guide to explore the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary or visit Bahia



Honda State Park to snorkel the exceptional coral reef at Looe Key. Those who want to stick closer to shore should rent a kayak to explore the mangroves tunnels of Stock Island.

Kayak in Key West



While kayaking in Key West with a small group from Lazy Dog, I paddled through the mangroves. My guide, Heather, pointed out nursing sharks, a nudibranch (an "inside out snail") and Cassiopea jellyfish. This unique jellyfish floats upside down and captures planktonic food while absorbing sunlight to photosynthesize into energy. She explained the importance of leaving the animals alone, not for our safety but theirs.



Quick tips for sustainable travel

Pack your good habits from home: turn off the air conditioning when not in your room, conserve tap water and recycle.

Don't feed wildlife, especially turtles, dolphins, manatees and Key deer.

Avoid using single-use plastics like straws, bags, utensils and waterbottles.

Practice [Leave No Trace](#) principles

When boating, remain in designated channels and respect no-motor zones

to preserve delicate sea grass meadows and slow down in no-wake zones to protect manatees.