

Blue Star: Turning Divers and Snorkelers into Partners in Coral Reef Protection in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

Program Goal: Blue Star is a program established by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) to reduce the impact of divers and snorkelers on the coral reef ecosystem by forming a partnership with commercial operators to educate their customers about the coral reef ecosystem, the Sanctuary, and diving and snorkeling etiquette.

Background: The Blue Star program will recognize dive and snorkel operators in the Florida Keys who meet set criteria designed to ensure that their customers are receiving information about the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, the coral reef ecosystem and how they can protect them through responsible diving and snorkeling.

Participation in the Blue Star program is completely voluntary, and the program involves no regulatory component. The program will be similar to the very successful “Clean Marina” program administered by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. NOAA endorses the Clean Marina Program- <http://cleanmarinas.noaa.gov/>

The framework that follows was developed with input from staff and owners of local dive and snorkel charters, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary staff and staff and interns from REEF Environmental Education Foundation over the course of eight meetings. The program has been publicized through newspaper articles and radio interviews, two presentations at Keys Association of Dive Operators (KADO) meetings, email invitations to the Keys Association of Dive Operators, a presentation to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, and a workshop at the United States Coral Reef Task Force meeting held in Miami.

Development of the program fulfills strategy E.4, activity 6, under the Education Action Plan of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary’s Final Management Plan. In addition, implementation of the Blue Star Program has been selected as a National Ocean Service milestone.

I Program Criteria: To participate in the Blue Star program, a dive or snorkel operator must meet the following criteria:

A. Train all staff to a standard of knowledge

1. Coral reef ecosystem
2. Etiquette for diving and snorkeling on coral reefs
3. Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

Method: Representatives from each business trained to train others. Ride-alongs with Sanctuary staff, periodic workshops and program resource binders used to train.

B. Conduct an on board briefing

1. Diving in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary
2. Sanctuary zones and other special rules

3. Coral reef ecosystem
4. Coral reef etiquette
5. Fish etiquette
6. How to learn more

Tools provided: Hard plastic briefing card with map provided by the Sanctuary

- C. Use mooring buoys when available, feasible and practical or anchor carefully in accordance with Sanctuary regulations.**
- D. Comply with all marine conservation laws and regulations.**
- E. Incorporate information in certification classes.**
1. Mirrors information in the briefing
 2. Sanctuary helps to provide information in appropriate formats, such as PowerPoint slides, written handouts
- F. Offer their divers and snorkelers the chance to become “Blue Star” partners.**
1. Customer attends special Blue Star reef etiquette briefing or watches reef etiquette video
 2. Customer reads and signs list of Blue Star diver and snorkeler responsibilities
 3. Customer receives Blue Star sticker
- G. Prominently display in operator’s shop appropriate brochures and other educational materials offered by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and other marine resource management agencies. If no facility is available for the operator, appropriate brochures and other educational materials need to be offered to clientele.**
- H. Display Blue Star placard and sticker on vessel**
- I. Link to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Blue Star web site.**
1. Using a standard logo and text that will be developed as the banner
 2. This applies only if the operator maintains a web site. They are not required to create one for the purposes of this program.
- J. Offer at least one conservation-related specialty course.**
1. For example, buoyancy control, REEF fish identification or underwater naturalist.
 2. FKNMS will develop a comprehensive list
 3. Courses not on the list can be approved by Sanctuary staff
- K. Offer at least one conservation-related special activity**
1. For example, offering Adopt A Reef clean-up dives or acting as a REEF Field Station.
 2. FKNMS will develop a comprehensive list
 3. Activities not on list can be approved by Sanctuary staff
- L. Require all staff to attend continuing education**
1. Could include lectures, presentations, sanctuary staff ride-alongs
 2. Must be marine conservation related.
 3. FKNMS will develop a comprehensive list
 4. Educational opportunities not on the list can be approved by Sanctuary

staff

5. Each staff will attend at least one continuing education session each year

M. Recycle engine oil is mandatory. Recycling of glass, plastic, cans and paper is encouraged.

N. Inform divers and snorkelers that the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary protects maritime heritage resources in order to preserve our shared cultural heritage. Shipwrecks and submerged artifacts should be left intact for others to visit and enjoy.

II Process for Program Participation

A. Initial Evaluation

1. Business owner or manager contacts Blue Star program coordinator indicating the desire to become Blue Star participant.
2. Program coordinator provides business owner/manager with a checklist of Blue Star program components and criteria, as well as materials to help the business prepare for an evaluation before participation and recognition are confirmed.
3. Business owner/manager attends an initial Blue Star training workshop (see paragraph B below for more details). The owner/manager ensures that all employees are trained to program standards before the evaluation, by either attending the initial training workshop or training their employees in-house with provided materials.
4. Following the training, business owner/manager reviews checklist of Blue Star program components and criteria and ensures their practices comply.
5. When prepared, business owner/manager contacts Blue Star coordinator to request an evaluation to verify their business is following the program criteria.
 - a. Evaluation occurs within four weeks of request;
 - b. Blue Star coordinator meets with participant at the business site on a mutually convenient date to review evaluation checklist;
 - c. Blue Star coordinator requests copies of company brochures and other advertising materials, reviews the participant's web page and conducts a web search to ensure all advertising information follows program criteria.
 - d. A Blue Star volunteer representative contacts the potential participant and discusses the trip to ensure that appropriate information is conveyed to customers;
 - e. Blue Star coordinator observes a complete dive or snorkel charter to ensure the briefing includes educational information, and that the captain (and other staff when applicable) is following program criteria;
 - f. Evaluation results are provided within four weeks of site visit and review of information.

6. Following successful completion of the evaluation, the owner/manager becomes an official Blue Star participant by signing an agreement to voluntarily follow Blue Star program criteria. The participant also receives recognition materials (see paragraph C below for more details) from the program partners and is included, as feasible, on all Blue Star materials as appropriate.
7. If the owner/manager does not meet all program criteria following the evaluation, the Blue Star coordinator provides a letter describing the manner in which the business is not meeting the program criteria and how best to revise their practices to conform. The Blue Star coordinator provides technical assistance, when possible. After reviewing the evaluation and making any suggested changes, the owner/manager contacts the Blue Star coordinator to arrange for a re-evaluation. The re-evaluation will be scheduled no later than four weeks after the request is made. (Note: If the request is made within six months of the initial evaluation, only areas in which the criteria are not being met will be re-evaluated. If the request is made more than six months after the initial evaluation, a full evaluation will be conducted.)

B. Initial Training Workshop

1. FKNMS will sponsor a training workshop designed to ensure all participants understand the framework and assist them in meeting the program criteria.
2. Training will initially be conducted twice per year, and then once per year, to ensure the availability of training for new participants.
3. Outreach and educational materials that are necessary for program participation and to train employees are provided to participants at no charge. These may include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Participation handbook:
 - i. Blue Star program framework
 - ii. Handouts of applicable laws
 - iii. List of pertinent websites
 - iv. Pertinent educational products, such as FKNMS brochures
 - b. Interactive website for training:

This training module provides all employees with standardized program training by providing an explanation of all components of the framework and how to adhere to them. It also provides a consistent means of training new employees. After successful completion of the online course, employees are able to print out a certificate indicating completion of the Blue Star online training.

C. Recognition

Upon successful completion of training, evaluation, and signing of voluntary Blue Star agreement, applicant is included on the list of program participants and receives all program materials, as well as a flag and/or decal with Blue Star logo to display on their vessel.

D. Annual Evaluation

Evaluation of participants annually is essential to gauge the program's effectiveness and success, which relies on participants continuing to follow the program criteria after their initial evaluation and after receiving recognition as a Blue Star participant. The goal of annual evaluation is to ensure that the Blue Star criteria are being followed, not to eliminate participants from the program. Therefore, the focus of the annual evaluation process is providing constructive comments to participants on their operations as related to Blue Star and working with them to meet program criteria.

1. A Blue Star volunteer who is trained through the Sanctuary's volunteer program or a third party entity conducts the annual evaluation. Evaluation techniques may include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Customer feedback through a third-party website such as scubadiving.com
 - b. Prearranged ride-along by the Blue Star Coordinator, trained volunteer, or third party, with feedback provided to the operator at the end of the trip.
2. All Blue Star participants, regardless of how many vessels and captains are associated with their business, are evaluated at least once per year.
3. Volunteers conducting Blue Star evaluations are rigorously trained and screened to ensure objectivity and accurate assessment.
4. The volunteer books and attends a regularly scheduled charter. The volunteer evaluates the charter for adherence to the Blue Star criteria using a standard reporting form. At the conclusion of the charter, the volunteer identifies himself to the operator as a Blue Star volunteer and reviews the evaluation results, noting any areas of concern and offering recommendations on how to address them. The operator will have the opportunity on the form to note any areas of disagreement regarding the evaluation. The volunteer notifies the operator that he will receive a copy of the evaluation results via mail, fax or email, whichever the operator prefers. The volunteer explains how the operator can challenge the evaluation if he disagrees with any observations or conclusions contained in the report. If a volunteer observes what he believes may be a violation of the law, he contacts the appropriate enforcement agency to report the incident.
5. The volunteer provides the evaluation form to the Blue Star coordinator, who forwards a copy to the participant. If there are any areas of deviation from the program criteria, the participant has 30 days to revise their practices. To the extent feasible, the Blue Star coordinator is available to provide technical assistance to the participant. The participant is re-evaluated after the 30-day timeframe mentioned above through an unannounced spot check, second volunteer evaluation, meeting with Blue Star program coordinator, or pre-arranged ride-along by the program coordinator, volunteer, or third party. The participant will not receive decals or flags for the new program year until they are determined to

have revised their practices to meet the Blue Star criteria. Only a current year decal and flag indicate active participation in Blue Star.

6. If a Blue Star participant disagrees with the findings of an annual evaluation, the participant submits a written description of the discrepancy. After reviewing both accounts, the program coordinator will decide whether the participant did not satisfy the criteria, triggering the process in paragraph 5, above. If the program coordinator determines that the participant successfully met the program criteria, this will be noted on the evaluation form. The participant will receive notification via email, mail or fax that no further action is required.

7. Government funds or grant funding administered by the government will cover the cost of trips taken by Blue Star volunteers to evaluate program participants.

8. Participants are welcome to provide feedback on the evaluation process to the program coordinator at all times.

9. Additional spot checks may be carried out on a random or unannounced basis to ensure that all participants continue to meet the program criteria.

10. Complaints from members of the public or other program participants that a participant is not following program criteria will be handled according to the procedure described in Section VI, below.

11. Scubadiving.com website – the scubadiving.com website (and possibly other dive- and snorkel-related travel websites) will be used as appropriate to gather feedback from customers who have taken trips with Blue Star operators. This feedback would not be used as a sole basis for renewal or non-renewal of a participant, but repeated complaints about an operator regarding coral reef education or diving practices may result in follow-up evaluation. Website feedback may also help to determine overall effectiveness of the program in reaching divers and snorkelers.

12. Comment cards – May be used if funds are available. These would be handed out to customers to fill out and return. Prize drawings may encourage higher return rate. Comment cards also provide opportunity to hit educational messages one more time.

E. Refresher Training

1. Prior to renewal and by December 1 of each year, participants complete the online interactive training course as a refresher training.

2. The course includes a question/answer section at the end of the training

for participants to complete. An e-mail notification is automatically sent to the Blue Star program coordinator to indicate the participant successfully completed the refresher course.

F. Annual Renewal

1. Recognition materials, such as vessel decals or flags that publicize participation in the program, display the current year (similar to vessel registration stickers).
2. Only a current-year decal/flag indicates active participation in the Blue Star program. Recognition for all Blue Star participants automatically expires at the end of each calendar year.
3. New stickers or flags are distributed in December each year to participants who:
 - a. successfully complete the annual evaluation and address potential problem areas found, in accordance with “D” above.
 - b. complete the required annual online refresher training prior to December 1. All employees must complete the online refresher.
4. Blue Star public awareness materials are updated as appropriate to reflect the current list of participants.

VI Complaints Procedure

The following procedure establishes a process to address complaints received by the program partners about Blue Star participants not meeting the program criteria.

A. Telephone/verbal complaints

A record of the conversation is made and the complainant asked to put their concerns in writing. The complainant is advised that a copy will be provided to the participant against whom the complaint was made. The procedure for written complaints then applies. No further action will be taken unless a signed, written complaint is received.

B. Written complaints

1. Complaints are date stamped and copied to the Blue Star program coordinator.
2. The program coordinator assesses whether the complaint relates to the program’s criteria not being followed. If the complaint does not relate to the program criteria, no further action is taken.
3. The program coordinator forwards a copy of the complaint to the participant involved, outlining the main points of the complaint and requesting a response within 30 days.

4. The program coordinator reviews the participant's response and considers whether or not the points have been adequately addressed. This may include a meeting with the participant to clarify any points.
5. If the program coordinator determines that the participant has deviated from the program criteria, they are given 30 days to address areas of concern. The participant is then re-evaluated through an unannounced spot-check, a meeting with the Blue Star program coordinator or pre-arranged ride-along. The program coordinator will select the most appropriate evaluation method. **Note: Any complaint from the public that appears to describe a violation of the law will be forwarded to NOAA Office of Law Enforcement or the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for action, as appropriate.*
6. If a second complaint is received within one year, the participant undergoes additional evaluation in accordance with the procedures described in paragraph 5, above.
7. If, within any twelve-month period, three complaints are received and are determined to be accurate, the participant will be ineligible for the Blue Star program for one year. The participant will be removed from Blue Star program materials as appropriate and will not receive annual renewal stickers or flags. (The Blue Star program will advise those seeking to book Blue Star participants to look for a current year sticker and flag.)
8. The participant may request re-evaluation and renewed participation after one full year of nonparticipation. **Note: If any complaint that is investigated by NOAA Office of Law Enforcement or Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission results in a judgment against the participant, the participant is dropped from the Program. Future reinstatement is at the discretion of the program partners.*

VII Framework Review

An annual review of the criteria for participation in Blue Star will ensure that the program is functioning as intended and provide the opportunity to address issues that were not foreseen when the criteria were initially developed.

- A. In June of each year, Blue Star participants are notified that the annual criteria review is commencing based on solicited input from participants, the public, and other appropriate parties on proposed revisions or additions. The comment timeframe is announced through e-mails or letters to participants and an announcement (not paid advertising) in local media.
- B. Program partners review input from participants and others, along with any internal proposals, and complete a new draft of the framework if necessary.

C. In August, the new draft framework is circulated among participants for comment, with 30 days for responses.

D. By September 30th each year, comments are reviewed, and the revised final framework provided to participants.

E. Participants agree to abide by all amendments to the Blue Star criteria.

F. Program participants have three months (October through December) to ensure their practices meet the revised criteria. The online refresher training will be based on the revised criteria. As of January 1st each year, the revised criteria are used for all participant evaluations.

VIII Raising Public Awareness About Blue Star Operators

To ensure that the Blue Star program is effective in reaching divers and snorkelers and to create a further incentive for operators to participate in the program, FKNMS will pursue the following public awareness activities:

- A. Create a Blue Star page as part of the Sanctuary's website, including a complete list of Blue Star operators.
- B. Work with dive, travel and other relevant media to publicize the Blue Star program.
- C. Present information about the program at relevant consumer and trade shows, such as Dive Equipment and Marketing Association annual show and Ocean Fest in Fort Lauderdale.
- D. Work with Monroe County Tourist Development Council and their PR firm Stuart Newman Associates to increase awareness about the program, as well as with other tourism related organizations such as FL USA.
- E. Consider a low cost (for ease of updating) hand out explaining the program and listing Blue Star operators for distribution in appropriate locations, such as hotels and visitor centers.
- F. Work to get information about Blue Star in tourist guides such as See's guides.
- G. Work to place information about the program on other relevant web sites
- H. Provide program stickers for boats and shop windows, stickers to give to divers and snorkelers, a placard for display on the boat and a plaque for display in the shop.