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Board of County Commissioners

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Rare Presence of Scallops Found in the Choctawhatchee Bay during Great Scallop Count

Okaloosa County, Florida – The Choctawhatchee Bay annual Great Scallop Count drew a strong showing of community volunteers this week and their efforts paid off with a significant milestone: the first physical evidence of bay scallops in Choctawhatchee Bay in years. However, the discovery came with a caveat, as no live scallops were found among the shells collected.

The event, organized by Okaloosa County's Natural Resources Team and Florida Sea Grant, assembled 29 participants who fanned out across designated survey grids in the bay to search seagrass beds for scallops, a shellfish species historically found in Choctawhatchee Bay but one that has gone unseen for years.

"The turnout this year was fantastic and it made all the difference," said Danielle Lasseigne, Coastal Resources Coordinator for Okaloosa County. "With that many people in the water covering ground, we were able to search far more of the bay than we normally could, and that's exactly how we ended up finding shells for the first time in years."

By the end of the day, teams had recovered more than 200 scallop shells. However, every shell recovered was empty, with no live scallops observed anywhere in the survey area.

The find is bittersweet for researchers. Survey teams conducted preliminary monitoring in the bay last month and documented numerous live scallops, raising hopes that a small but viable population may have been reestablishing itself in Choctawhatchee Bay. This week's results suggest that the population suffered a mortality event in the weeks since.

"Going from live animals last month to nothing but empty shells is tough," said Dana Stephens of Florida Sea Grant. "But I don't want that to overshadow what a big deal it is to have confirmed evidence of scallops in this bay again. That's the first sign in years that conditions can support them, even if only briefly, and it gives us something concrete to build on."

Bay scallops are highly sensitive to water quality conditions, including low dissolved oxygen, high water temperatures, and salinity fluctuations, any of which could plausibly affect a small, localized population over a short period. Follow-up surveys are planned in the coming months to determine whether any scallops survived.

The count also drew heavy participation from the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance, a leading authority on restoration efforts for Choctawhatchee Bay. Eglin's Jackson Guard also supported the effort with personnel and local business Luther's Pontoons donated the use of vessels for the day, allowing volunteer teams to reach survey grids that would otherwise have been difficult to access.

“This is an inspiring find,” said Trey Goodwin, Chairman of the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners. “Our waters once supported healthy populations of bay scallops, and this discovery offers hope that they can again. Okaloosa County is committed to improving the health of our bays and bayous so that a thriving scallop population can one day return to Choctawhatchee Bay.”

The Great Scallop Count is part of Okaloosa County's broader effort to monitor the health of Choctawhatchee Bay's seagrass and shellfish communities. It depends each year on community volunteers or citizen scientists to cover its survey areas. This year's showing of volunteers was a crucial part of the success of the findings.

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