

ED KILLER

Ed Killer: Reef builder Dillon will be missed

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ed.killer@tcpalm.com

Ed Killer: Reef builder Kerry Dillon, 58, gone too soon

[Ed Killer](#), ed.killer@tcpalm.com 9:22 p.m. ET June 17, 2017



(Photo: CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY SEA ROVER SERVICES)

The last time I ran into Kerry Dillon, the smile on my face spread ear to ear. I knew I would hear about his latest undersea adventure. Like all of his tales, I knew it would be something I could only imagine in my wildest dreams — and it was.

He had recently been diving The Wickstrom Reef, a steel freighter intentionally sunk in 2003 by Martin County and donated by the Wickstrom family of Stuart. The reef sits in 180 feet of water about 12 miles off St. Lucie Inlet. Dillon saw the silhouette of a large fish swimming quickly from out of the shadows. As it neared, he realized it was probably a type of billfish. Instinctively, he sharpened his vision expecting to see a sailfish.

It took him a few seconds to realize why he didn't see the telltale dorsal fin of the sail: The fish was actually a blue marlin.

"I had never before seen a blue marlin underwater!" he excitedly told me. "I managed to get a few seconds of GoPro video before it swam off into the deep again. It was incredible."

He also told me about a video he made of an octopus "making love" to his camera, and was alarmed at how he just hasn't been seeing the large schools of barracuda on our reefs like he used to. I made a mental note to be sure to contact Dillon in a couple weeks for follow up stories.

We had run into each other at the Marine Industries Association of the Treasure Coast's annual dinner. It was Thursday, June 8. Four days later, Dillon had passed away at home. He was 58.

Dillon leaves behind his children Lucas, 17, Isabella, 12, and his wife of 23 years, Ximena.

"Kerry loved the ocean, and it's where he wanted to be," Ximena said. "He always told me when he was underwater, he was comfortable and at peace. He was a really good person, and had many friends, but his true passion was the ocean and he dedicated most of his life to it."



Kerry Dillon (Photo: CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY KERRY DILLON)

Dillon was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and grew up in Middleton, New Jersey. He first discovered the Treasure Coast when he moved to Jensen Beach in 1979 to attend Florida Institute of Technology (when the Melbourne-based school had a satellite campus here). Not long after he graduated in 1986, he began working as a commercial diver.

Dillon was a lucky man. He loved what he did, so, as the old saying goes, he never worked a day in his life. While many of us head to our office to take our daily places in our cubicle behind a desk, Dillon's office was 100 or more feet beneath the waves surrounded by the warmth of the deep blue sea. He welcomed the daily mysteries of the sea and its creatures.

He owned Sea Rover Services. He was contracted by several artificial reef programs in Florida counties to provide detailed underwater surveys of reef sites. Regularly, he recorded condition of the structure, took measurements or made notes of changes and recorded the number and species

of marine life using the reef. Of the four or five artificial reef deployments I've personally attended in waters offshore of Martin and St. Lucie counties, Dillon was on site for all of them.

Shortly after a tug boat, cargo ship or pile of concrete power poles slipped below the waves on its way to the sea floor, Dillon, in wetsuit and mask, would drop over the side of his iconic boat and head down to see how the material landed. It was his job to get photos and video, and verify the exact location of the structure. He was the man who would provide the official GPS coordinates for the reef before they could be publicized and added to charts used by anglers and other divers.

His copious, detailed notes of more than 20 reef projects can be read on the [Martin County Artificial Reef Program](#) website.

"We all relied very heavily on him as a jack-of-all-trades," said Martin County Coastal Engineer Kathy FitzPatrick in an email to colleagues about Dillon's passing, and who was a close friend of his. "Kerry was a devoted husband and father, passionate diver and marine conservationist. He will be greatly missed, although his presence will persist, especially every time one of us hits the water."

Keith Mille, biological administrator for the artificial reef program with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, said Dillon was a loving steward of successful artificial reef systems in this region.

"This is all still sinking in for so many of us," Mille said. "While it's tough to think about artificial reefs along the Treasure Coast without Kerry, he leaves behind an incredible legacy of an incredible system of fishing and diving destinations to be enjoyed for future generations."

Dillon's own words illustrated his enthusiasm for the undersea universe: "Recreational diving allowed me the youthful chance to discover the ocean's many wonders beneath the waves. Commercial diving gave me the opportunity to make an exciting, rewarding career of diving adventures from what was once a hobby. ... Regardless of which type of diving we choose, it's all about being underwater and exploring. So far there is nothing in cyberspace that can compare. Let's go diving!"

Somewhere, out there, beneath the surface of the deep blue sea, Dillon is doing just that — diving.

Kerry Dillon remembrances

Viewing: 6-8 p.m. Friday at All County Funeral Home, 1010 N.W. U.S. 1, Stuart

Service: 11 a.m. Saturday at St. Christopher Catholic Church, 12001 S.E. U.S. 1, Hobe Sound

In lieu of flowers, the family requests contributions to be made in his name to the [MCAC Artificial Reef Fund](#).

Ed Killer is the outdoors columnist for Treasure Coast Newspapers and TCPalm.com, and this column reflects his opinion. Friend him on Facebook at Ed Killer, follow him on Twitter @tcpalmekiller or email him at ed.killer@tcpalm.com or call him at 772-221-4201.

Ed Killer is award-winning multimedia journalist, photographer and radio show host affiliated with the Stuart News since 1994.