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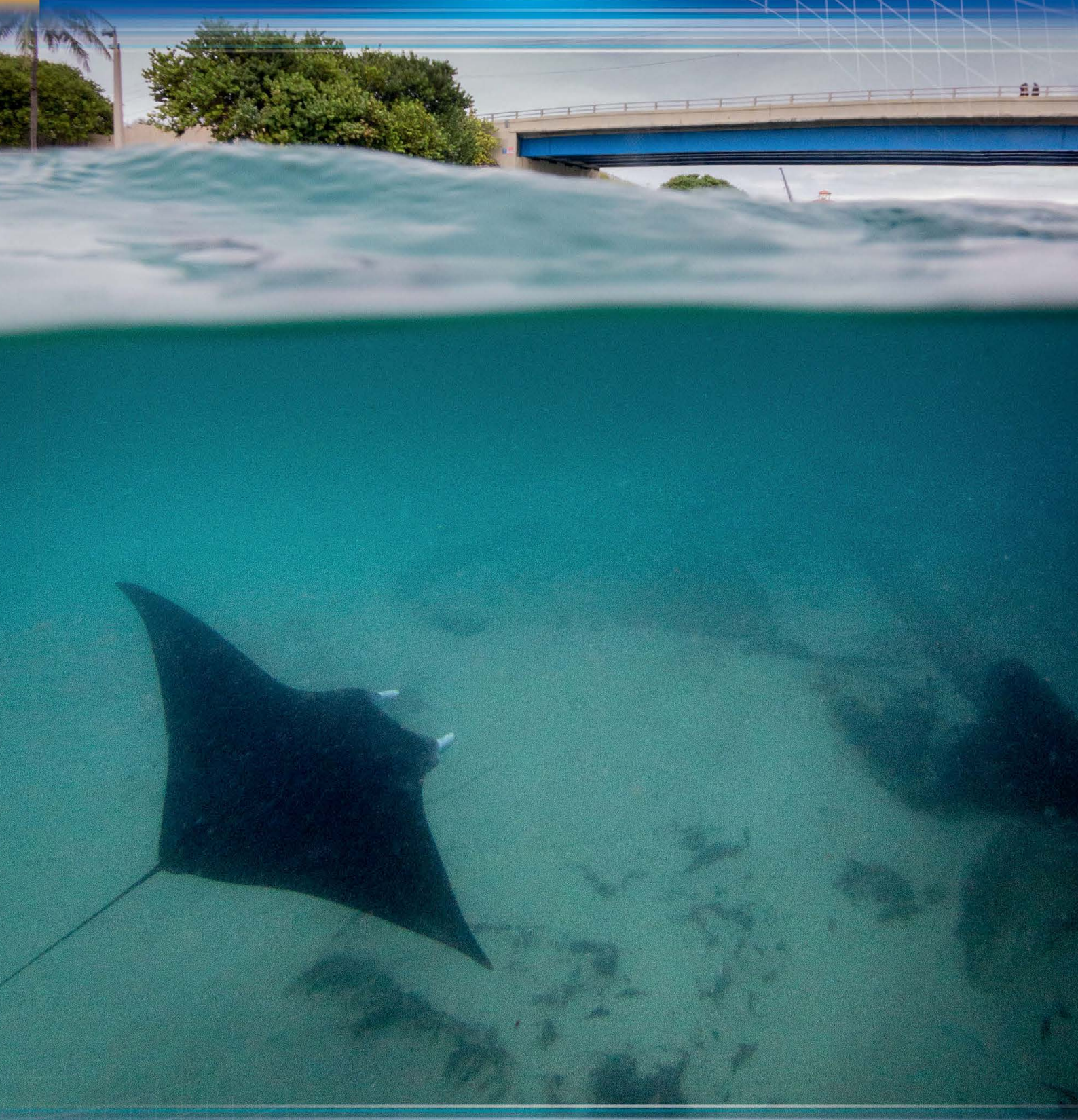
INTERNATIONAL Ocean Systems

March/April 2021

The Magazine for Ocean Professionals



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HEAD OFFICE
Underwater World Publications Ltd
Suite B, 74 Oldfield Road,
Hampton, Middlesex, TW12 2HR, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 8941 8152
Email: ios@divermag.co.uk
Web: www.intoceansys.co.uk

Editor
Daniel Johnson – daniel@divermag.co.uk

Advertising Sales
Dorothy Eaton – dorothy@divermag.co.uk

Publisher
Nigel Eaton – nigel@divermag.co.uk

Editorial Board
Cliff Funnell, Cliff Funnell Associates
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Production
George Lanham – george@divermag.co.uk

Circulation Manager
Mike Foster

International Ocean Systems
(ISSN 1471–0188, USPS No. 22341)
is published bi-monthly (6 x per annum) by Underwater World Publications Ltd, and distributed in the USA by Asendia USA, 701 Ashland Ave, Folcroft, PA 19032
Periodicals postage paid at Philadelphia, PA, and additional mailing offices

POSTMASTER – send address corrections to: International Ocean Systems, 701 Ashland Ave, Folcroft, PA 19032

©2021 Underwater World Publications Ltd

Printed by Pensord Press Ltd, Tram Road, Pontllanfraith, Blackwood NP12 2YA, UK

FRONT COVER:
A manta ray swims through the Boynton Beach Inlet in South Florida. *Photo: Bryant Turffs*
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NEXT ISSUE:
Connectors/Cables/Winches; Offshore Renewables/Offshore Technology
Editorial by March 30, please

DIVER group

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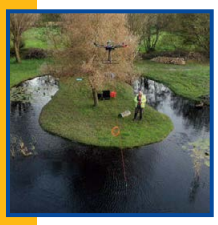
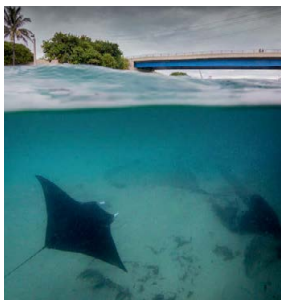




Shallow water current prof

Uncovering the secrets of manta ray behaviour with Nortek's new mini ADCP

Understanding why marine animals are using some places and not others is crucial to minimising our impact on them. Recently, the new Eco ADCP from Norway-based Nortek has been helping one marine biologist, with no previous experience in using oceanographic instruments, characterise current flows in one of the manta ray's more unusual shallow-water coastal habitats with simplicity and ease.

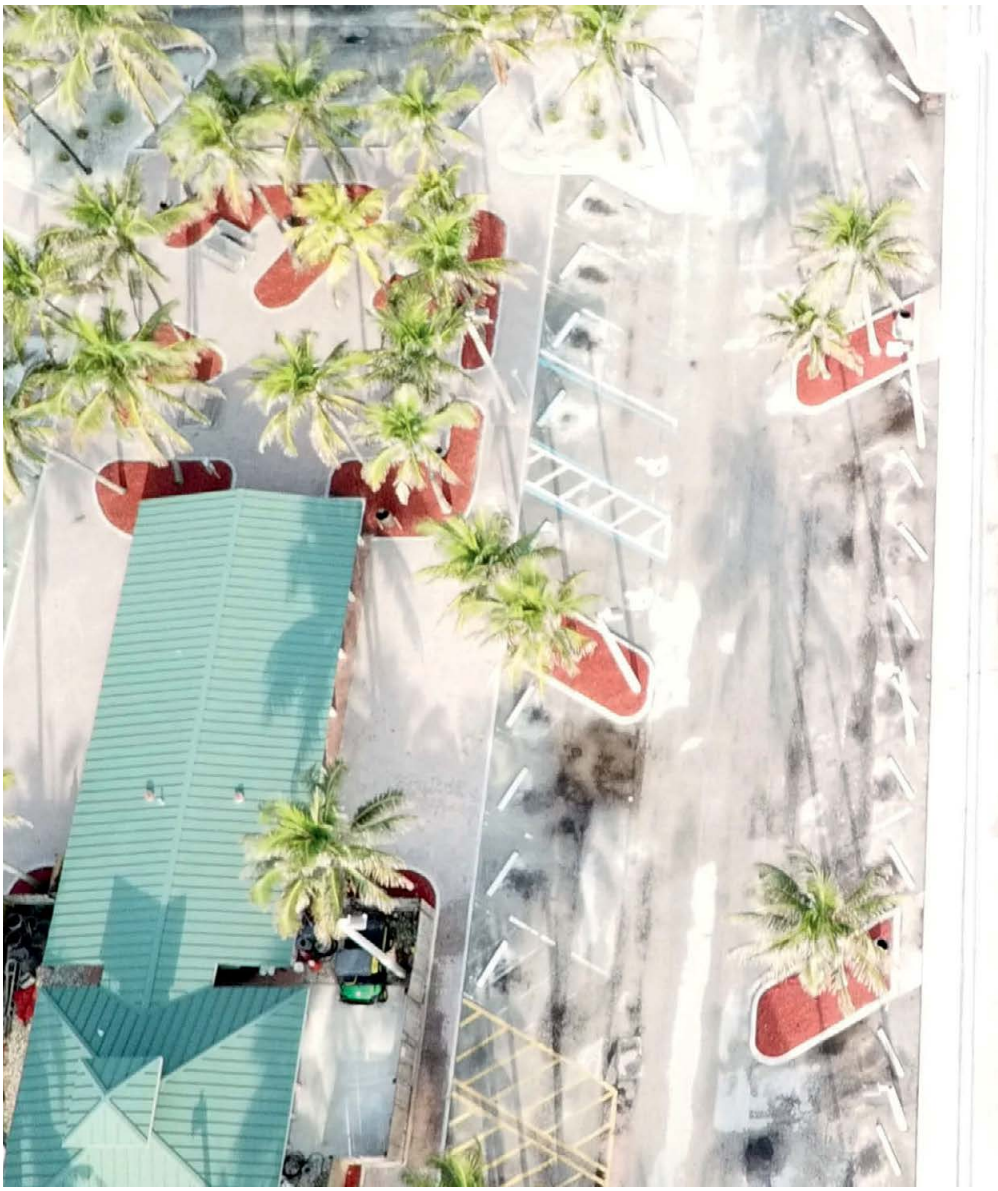
Powerful yet graceful, manta rays top almost everyone's list of must-see marine animals. While people flock to places like Indonesia or the Maldives to watch these gentle giants, one location has gone relatively unnoticed – South Florida.

"I lived in Florida working as a sea turtle biologist, and a lot of data collection involved being on the beach all day," recounts Jessica Pate, a marine biologist with the Marine Megafauna Foundation. "Sometimes I would notice these big, black shapes swimming right next to shore in less than a metre of water."

Surprised to see manta rays, Pate searched for more information but found very little. "I know hundreds of people researching sea turtles, and I couldn't believe that no one was studying manta rays [in South Florida]," she says.

MANTA RAYS FAVOUR SHALLOW WATER WITH STRONG CURRENTS

With Florida's coast so highly developed, it is a surprising location for a nursery area. What's more, these particular "urban manta rays" are also singling out some particularly hazardous locations.



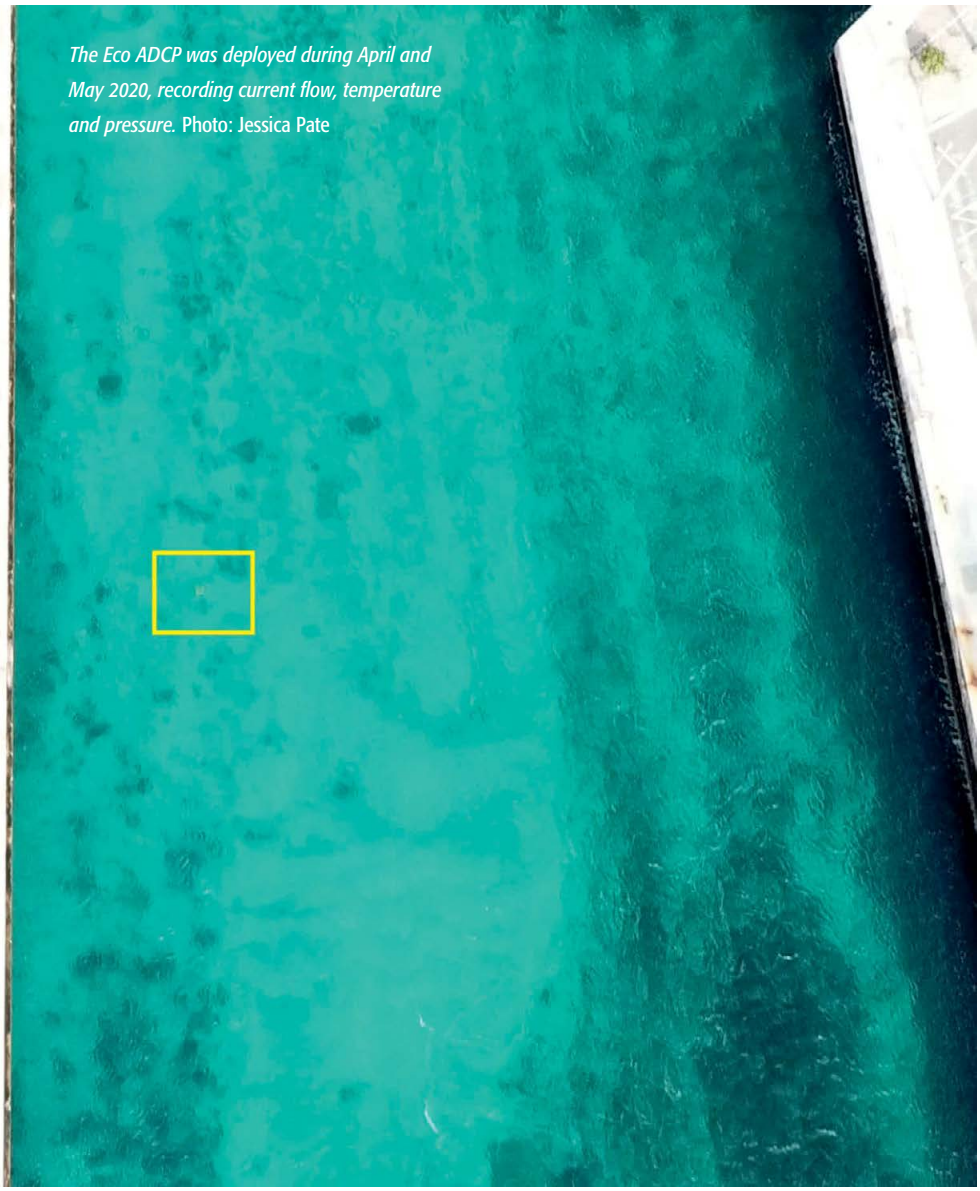
"There's this man-made inlet [Boynton Beach Inlet] that's known for being one of the most dangerous inlets because it's very skinny with seawalls, and boats come flying through. I try to avoid it at all costs," Pate says.

Despite the risks, and the shallow water (Pate estimates Boynton Beach Inlet's maximum depth to be around 10 metres), the inlet seems to be a popular location for the manta rays. "They will come around and face into the current, which is really strong, and just sit," says Pate, who sees groups of up to six manta rays sitting in the inlet for hours at a time.

EXCHANGING FLOATING ORANGES FOR MORE ACCURATE TECHNOLOGY

Pate knew that currents in the inlet are fast, but to properly characterise the flow she needed to be able to measure them.

iles in a groundbreaking package



The Eco ADCP was deployed during April and May 2020, recording current flow, temperature and pressure. Photo: Jessica Pate

However, the costs of purchasing an ADCP quickly became a major roadblock. In search of alternatives, Pate started to consider other, much less accurate, options.

"I did an experiment with the drone, where I tossed oranges into the water with the hope of measuring the surface current," Pate says. Fortunately, when the Eco came along, Pate did not have to resort to oranges any more.

The Eco is designed with users like Pate in mind – those who are interested in understanding the physical nature of shallow-water environments but lack in-depth training or experience in using oceanographic instruments. Fitted with a transducer with a maximum profiling range of 20 metres, plus sensors for temperature, pressure, tilt and heading, the Eco offers such users a simpler, low-cost and user-friendly alternative to its larger, more heavily equipped sibling ADCPs.

"It was so easy to set up. All you do is go onto the online portal, input the time and date you want it to start recording, and deploy it," says Pate.

Being just the size of a large coffee cup, the Eco is a natural fit for the shallows and is extremely portable – a feature which proved particularly useful when Covid-19 restrictions in 2020 blocked access to the marina containing the boat Pate could use. Instead of using a boat, Pate's boyfriend deployed the instrument using his stand-up paddleboard.

EFFORTLESS PROCESSING OF CURRENT DATA

Data collection is one thing, but for those like Pate who do not regularly work with oceanographic instruments, extracting the data and translating it into something meaningful can be a challenge.

For Pate, the deployment reports generated by the Eco were a boon.

"It was pretty idiot-proof," she says, explaining that generating the reports simply requires connecting the Eco wirelessly to a website and waiting for the report (and the raw data) to be produced.

"When I got the reports, I was very excited that [the software] put everything together for me instead of sending me a spreadsheet with a bunch of data that I didn't understand," says Pate, who was quickly able to identify some interesting patterns from the visualisations provided.

"I learned that the surface current and the bottom current are not the same," Pate recounts, noting that the bottom current is stronger than the surface, on incoming tides, and with the full moon.

Using the Eco ADCP to understand and raise awareness about manta ray habitat

For any at-risk species, protecting juveniles and their nursery areas is generally considered a must-do.