

Sponge Diver

Soaking up a living from the sea
& a sea of tourist in Tarpon Springs



KODAK NC2000



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■ **A last look and a wave.** Diver Robert McNulty "Fro" floats alongside the dive boat before descending in search of a sponge during the half hour exhibition.

Photographs and text by
DAVID TUCKER

TARPON SPRINGS, Fla. — Robert McNulty "Fro" a diver with 20 years experience wears a business suit that weights 172 pounds.

Several times daily from the sponge docks at Tarpon Springs aboard a traditional Greek sponge boat the St Nicholas VII "Fro" entertains tourist on a half hour sponge diving exhibition.

Narration on the history of sponge industry comes from Angelo Billiris, who's family established the cruise line in 1924. When not entertaining tourists, divers like Fro regularly head into the Gulf of Mexico staying days at

a time picking the different sponges growing there.

Once the sponge capital of the world with hundreds of boats working from Appalachicola to Key West bringing millions of dollars in sponge yearly. But a bacterial blight in the mid 1940 destroyed the industry.

In its heyday many shops and restaurants opened along the dock area to serve the boat crews and soon tourists came to view the sponges. A new industry was born.

Over the years, hundreds of shops and several restaurants have opened - many still owned by the same families that started them. The sponge industry was revived in the 1980 when healthy sponge beds were found. Tarpon Springs is once again a leader in the natural sponge market.



Nikon D1



Nikon D1

■ **SOFT AND FUZZY** A basket full of sponges await buyers in front of a shop on Dodecanese Blvd. near the docks where all shapes and sizes of sponges can be found.

■ **TOURISTS WATCH DIVE ACTION** Stephanie Proctor, 3, and dad Bill watch closely as the diver demonstrates how the dive suit works. With a valve inside his helmet Robert McNulty uses his head to inflate to float or deflate the suit to reach the bottom.