



Critters in Our Midst: West Indian Manatee

by Carol Ellis

A family of manatees, one with a mutilated tail, forage in an Ocean Reef channel. In 1951 Everglades National Park biologist Joseph Moorea began the now-standard practice of identifying individual manatee by the propeller scars on their backs caused by careless operation of motorboats.

A manatee is a harmless, slow-moving aquatic mammal - not a fish - with a light brown-to-gray hide, often covered with barnacles and algae. Their nickname "sea cow" comes from their diet of seagrasses and aquatic plants found in shallow waters adjacent to tropical shorelines. Fossil records indicate manatees were present in the bays and rivers of Florida about 15 million years ago.



Today it is illegal to pursue, harass or play with a manatee. Man hugging a manatee Miami Seaquarium circa 1987 (Credit: Archives State of Florida)

In 1832 when Audubon visited the Keys he wrote about "those singular animals called Sea Cows or Marratees [sic], and he had conquered hundreds of them...because the flesh and hide bring 'a fair price,' at Havannah [sic]."

The West Indian manatee includes two subspecies: Florida manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*) and Antillean manatee (*Trichechus manatus manatus*). Florida manatees are found along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf of America (formerly Mexico) coasts and in the northern Caribbean, from the Bahamas to Turks and Caicos. They grow to 7 feet and large specimens weigh from 400 pounds to 1 ton.

In 1891, Kirk Monroe wrote that the manatee "abounds" in Biscayne Bay and related an incident in which his Miami neighbors killed one of a "herd" of five, supplying the "settlement of 100 souls with meat for three days."

In 1893, Florida law made it illegal to kill or capture manatees. Despite the law,

the waters of the Keys were akin to the wild west... albeit a wet and wild frontier. In 1919 Zane Grey, renowned author of westerns, and President of the Long Key Fishing Club, wrote: "Who fishes just to kill? At Long Key last winter I met two self-styled sportsmen. They were eager to convert me to what they claimed was the dry-fly class angling of the sea. And it was to jab harpoons and spears into porpoises and manatee and sawfish, and be dragged about in their boat. The height of their achievements that winter had been the harpooning of several sawfish, each of which gave birth to a little one while being fought

on the harpoon! Ye gods! It would never do to record my utterances."

Miami's boom of the 1920s gave rise to greater populations living in South Florida, particularly near the coast. Then came the bust and Floridians resorted to hunting manatee to put food on the table to survive the Great Depression of 1929. Historically, the Seminole Indian Tribe used the manatee for food, traded the skins for essentials, and used the bones in rituals.

Manatees are thermo-regulators, meaning that they attempt to maintain a constant body temperature. In nature, manatees retreat



Manatees search for fresh drinking water, but never feed or water them. This could attract them to dangerous areas, like docks, putting them at greater risk of a boat strike. It is also illegal to feed and water manatees.

to deeper areas where a layer of salty bottom water helps to trap heat and allow for warmer conditions.

Like manatees, Florida was settled by people seeking refuge from the cold. As populations grew, so did the range of the manatees, who were frequently seen in canals and yacht basins, attracted by a new form of warm-water

West Indian Manatee...

CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



Indians killed the manatee for food; fried, grilled, or boiled or dehydrated by smoking beside a fire under a chickee hut. They'd trade the hide for coffee, sugar and salt. Bones were used for rituals.

refuge caused by population growth. The advent of large power plants aligns with the manatee's expansion up the Atlantic Coast of Florida. Power plants were constructed in Fort Lauderdale (1926), Palm Beach (1946), and Ft. Pierce (1945), and later up the Gulf Coast to Ft. Myers and St. Petersburg (1958) and Crystal River (1966).

By the early 1970s it became clear that the manatee was struggling with the effects of living close to man. Boat collisions, habitat loss, seagrass decline, coastal development, human interaction, toxic red tide algal blooms and climate change impacts threatened their existence. The Marine Mammal Protection Act was



A Florida "Save the Manatee" license plate is a smart way to support manatee research, rescue, and monitoring efforts.



The Save the Manatee Committee Chairman Jimmy Buffett and Pat Rose, Department of Natural Resources, review a script promoting manatee awareness and education. (Credit: Archives State of Florida)

passed in 1972. In 1975 the manatee was named the "Florida State Marine Mammal," and in 1978 the Florida legislature enacted Florida's Marine Sanctuary Act. The Save the Manatee Committee was established in 1981 by Jimmy Buffett and Gov. Bob Graham to promote awareness and education about the endangered West Indian Manatee.

In 1991, the U.S. Fish and



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Wildlife Service (USFWS) aerial survey of the manatee population revealed only 1300 individuals. By 2016 things were improving, and the it was downgraded from endangered status to threatened. In 2019 the USFWS estimate of Florida Manatee was at about 6300.

The 2022-23 USFWS survey estimated Florida Manatee numbered 8,350-11,730. The manatee's history in Florida is linked to population growth and development, and their survival in our era is unclear. The fact that this creature has persisted to this day gives me hope for the future.

Rules for living with Manatees



- Look for manatees before starting your boat
- Use caution when navigating in shallow water. Manatees have greater difficulty diving away from boats in these areas.
- Heed "slow speed," "no wake" and manatee warning signs, especially around docks.
- Wear polarized sunglasses to reduce glare, making it easier to spot manatees below the surface.
- Watch for large swirls in the water, called footprints, that may be caused by manatees diving away from the boat.
- Never feed manatees or give them fresh water.
- Never pursue, harass, or play with manatees. These actions are also illegal.
- Report injured, orphaned, entangled, distressed, or dead manatees to the state's wildlife agency.

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