

## Manatees Make a Splash in Mobile Bay

The waters of coastal Alabama have been known for many things. Whether you're fishing for speckled trout, watching the mullet jump, or lounging in a boat on a lazy Sunday afternoon, the Mobile Bay is a treasured part of Alabama's culture. Now, this beloved bay is becoming popular for another reason. Over the past several years, biologists and residents have been tracking endangered manatees in Mobile Bay and surrounding river systems.

West Indian manatees are federally protected under the Endangered Species Act. We've grown accustomed to thinking of them as living in Florida because that's where they concentrate during the winter. But Mobilians are quickly learning that manatees also take lengthy vacations on the Alabama Gulf Coast.

Suzi Mutascio has lived on Dog River for 22 years. She used to think manatees in Alabama were just an old wives' tale. But August 11, 2010 changed her view forever. That was the first time Mutascio ever witnessed a manatee capture, and the giant creature quickly won her heart.

"There were veterinarians, students and biologists right next to my house, including folks from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sea World, and Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network," explains Mutascio. "They brought the manatee to my convenient beach. I still cannot find the words to aptly describe the poignancy of that experience for me. I was in a complete state of awe to be so close to such a magnificent animal."



Biologists and researchers tag a manatee (photo by Dauphin Island Sea Lab)

That day, Mutascio learned what federal, state and local biologists had been studying for years: manatees spend a lot of time in the Mobile Bay area. Dr. Ruth Carmichael is senior marine scientist at the University of South Alabama. She's also founder of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab's Manatee Sighting Network.

"We have learned that manatees are not accidental visitors to our area. They are regular, at least seasonal residents," explains Carmichael. "We have many of the same animals returning from

year to year. We also have evidence that some of our visiting manatees may spend more time in the northern Gulf than in peninsular Florida, which changes much of what has been previously understood about these animals.”

How regular are these visits? Last year, biologists recorded 144 public manatee sightings in Alabama. Carmichael and other researchers are able to track this information thanks to funding provided by the Endangered Species Act. Dianne Ingram is a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alabama Field Office.

“Recovery of endangered species is the ultimate goal for species protected under the ESA. Research and knowledge about this species’ behavior and time spent in Alabama waters contribute to potential steps in reaching that goal. Confirming that some of these same animals return to Alabama year after year tells me we are doing something right,” Ingram said.



FWS Biologist Dianne Ingram (Photo by Dauphin Island Sea Lab)

Two years ago, Alabama researchers hit a milestone. They tagged their first manatee, allowing scientists to track the animal by satellite and radio telemetry. They nicknamed the giant female “Bama.”

“Our goal is to study their travel routes and get data on where they spend time in Alabama. Knowing this will help us learn about their migration patterns and habitat to aid in their recovery,” said Ingram.

As for the locals, recovery is crucial. At Dog River, manatees have become part of their heritage and sense of community. The neighborhood is now decorated with signs, educating folks on the presence of manatees. The endangered animals have gotten so popular, the Sea Lab is collecting pledges for a specialty Alabama car tag featuring manatees. The tag has already been designed, and participants are still collecting pledges before the proposed tag can become a reality. Part of the money spent on these specialized tags will go to manatee research.

“It’s amazing how these gentle giants have fostered a sense of community cohesiveness!” exclaims Mutascio, who is now a manatee enthusiast.

Mutascio says manatee outreach and education have inspired families to learn more about Alabama's great outdoors. She has hosted several community gatherings at her house to discuss protective measures for manatees, featuring slideshows and potluck dinners. Service biologists have attended these much-anticipated dinners. Mutascio says it's especially important for kids to get involved, so they can be stewards of the state's most precious resources.

"The presence of manatees is the very element that grabs their attention. Without question, these vulnerable animals qualify to receive all of the legal protection that can be obtained," says Mutascio.

If you see a manatee or would like to volunteer, please call 1-866-493-5803.