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Walker 343-2463
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FEATURE

U.S. MAY LOSE ITS MERMAID

The United States may lose its mermaid, or at least the sea creature that sailors of old mistook for mermaids--after the sailors had been at sea a long time. That creature is the manatee or sea cow, a mammal presently threatened with extinction in U.S. waters.

A manatee just isn't a pretty mammal; it weighs almost half a ton when fully grown and has a blunt, whiskered face with prominent nose. The body is rotund, with hind limbs replaced by a flat rounded tail. This and the flippered forelimbs enable it to move sluggishly in the water. As a mammal it must surface to breathe, but can remain submerged for long periods before rising to float lazily on the surface.

Today the manatee thrives in South and Central American waters, but the only remaining population in the United States lives along the southern shores of Florida. It once did well from North Carolina to Texas, but numbers and range have been shrinking dramatically in the 20th century.

The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife of the Department of the Interior has classified the animal as endangered, which means that protective measures must be taken or it may become extinct in the United States.

Top Bureau officials believe current legal protection in Florida should be continued and enforced rigorously. More sanctuaries should be set aside. Impounding certain areas and experimentally stocking

them with manatees might also be helpful.

No one knows how many manatees are alive today in Florida but hunting for flesh, oil, skins, and "fun" was a major cause for a declining population. Other possible causes: siltation of coastal feeding grounds, frigid weather which induces pneumonia, predation of young by crocodiles and sharks, and injury received from keels and propellers of power boats.

Everglades National Park is one of the few sanctuaries left for the animal, but even here it is in danger from boats. Manatees persist in small numbers in such heavily used boating areas of southeastern Florida as Biscayne Bay, Miami River, and New River. Because they are sensitive to the cold, they can sometimes be seen in the Miami area coming inland to bask in the warm waters near power stations.

Manatees are prized in Latin American coastal waters because they browse on and thus help control nuisance weeds in waterways. This has led to interest in the United States in using the animals similarly, to control weeds in irrigation channels.

The animals do rather well in captivity. Miami and several other zoos have live specimens. A pair gave birth to a calf at the Miami Seaquarium. Five are kept under captive conditions for study purposes in a canal near Fort Lauderdale.

The breeding rate in the wild is usually a single calf each year. The mother floats on her back and suckles the calf until it is able to fend for itself. The youngster learns quickly to dive, swim, and control oxygen in its lungs for long periods.

Once there was a giant manatee in north Pacific waters. This Steller sea cow was wiped out by Russian hunters in the Bering Sea two centuries ago. Conservationists hope the same fate is not in store for the Florida cousin