

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release January 23, 1979

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## PROCEDURES PROPOSED FOR DESIGNATING MANATEE PROTECTION AREAS IN FLORIDA

The Federal Government has joined the State of Florida in proposing to establish protection areas in that State's inland and coastal waters to keep the endangered manatee from moving closer to extinction. The effort is aimed at reducing human contributions to last year's loss of an estimated 10 percent of the remaining Florida population of this unusual mammal.

A warm-blooded vegetarian also known as the sea cow, the up to 1 ton, torpedo-shaped mammal feeds underwater and surfaces frequently to breathe. Lacking even speed as a defense mechanism, it is often unable to evade oncoming boats and skiers.

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed procedural regulations for designating manatee protection areas in the January 23, 1979, Federal Register. Specific sites for Federal protection would be proposed later, if necessary, to reinforce Florida's efforts under State laws passed last year. Florida has held a series of public hearings on the various areas it has proposed in 10 counties as manatee sanctuaries.

Human activities, especially power boats, are by far the greatest identifiable cause of manatee mortality and injury. Nearly every living manatee bears cuts and deformities that were inflicted by boat propellers. The docile creatures have also been injured or killed by flood control

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structures and fishing gear, while others have been harassed when pursued by curious humans, intent on a closer look or photograph of this mythical mermaid.

The manatees are in greatest danger during the winter months when they congregate in warm water near natural springs or power plant discharges in search of the upper-60 degree temperatures that are essential for their survival.

Under the proposed regulations, two categories of manatee protection areas--refuges and sanctuaries--could be established, with water-related activities either restricted or prohibited altogether at certain times of the year. A new concept in protection designed specifically for the manatee and its unique problems, the protection areas have no relationship to national wildlife refuges, which are federally acquired lands.

Water-related activities include boating of any type, swimming, scuba diving, snorkling, skiing, or surfboarding. Limits could be imposed in manatee refuges on boat speeds or the number of swimmers that could be in the water at one time when manatees are present. Water-related activities would not be allowed at all in areas designated as manatee sanctuaries.

The only sizable manatee population in the United States inhabits inland and coastal waters of the Florida peninsula. During warmer months some of these animals move into coastal waters of neighboring States. Hunted to near extinction years ago for their meat and leather, their recovery has been hampered by human-caused mortality and a slow reproductive rate.

The manatee is protected by the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act and has been listed as an endangered species since 1967. It has also been protected under Florida State law since 1893, where it is now the official State marine mammal.

Public comment is invited on the proposed procedural regulations through February 22, 1979, and should be sent to the Director (LE), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 19183, Washington, D.C. 20036.

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