

Manatee Status Upgrade: Success Ignored

Guest Column by Dave Hankla

Reading recent editorials and reporting on the manatee's future and the science being used to chart that future, I was reminded of a New Yorker cartoon in which a judge, speaking from the bench, tells a lawyer, "In the interest of streamlining the process, we'll skip the evidence and go directly to sentencing."

Where the manatee and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's review of its status are concerned, some have done just that – jumped straight to the sentencing without any substantive consideration of the compelling science that validates positive progress for the manatee.

Our internal five-year review represents a success milestone and an opportunity for all our partners in manatee conservation to celebrate. We are proud of the contributions they have made over the past decades towards the conservation, protection, and recovery of the West Indian manatee. A recommendation to upgrade the status of this species from endangered (at risk of becoming extinct) to threatened (at risk of becoming endangered) is, in part, recognition of the success those efforts represent.

We are excited about the manatee's future. We know serious work remains to be done. Federal, State and local wildlife agencies, researchers, conservation interests, resources users and the power and marine industries still have key roles to play in continuing our forward momentum toward securing this species' future.

Our review used the best science available including a cutting-edge population model that, for the first time, allowed us to do a quantitative analysis of the threats faced by this species. The Manatee Core Biological Model (CBM) was developed by a team of scientists led by Dr. Mike Runge of the U. S. Geological Survey and refined under a contract with the Service. This highly-respected team provided us a solid, peer-reviewed scientific tool to clearly assess the demographic status of the Florida manatee and evaluate key threats faced by this species.

The scientists modeled a variety of conditions and timeframes. The results we used to form our recommendations were conservative. That is, if anything, they erred on the side of species protection. However, special interests have used the results to pick and choose the scenario(s) that best support their own agenda, doing an injustice to both the science and the manatee.

Others are concerned we did not use the recovery criteria found in our 2001 Florida Manatee Recovery Plan. The law requires us to use the best science available. The 2001 criteria were largely outdated and no longer represented the best science. Thus, we could not rely upon them for our assessment and said so in our review.

We are aware of the 2006 manatee mortalities. Raw numbers, however, do not offer a complete picture, and single data points do not provide scientists sufficient information upon which to determine population trends. When data from an extended period of time is used, a clearer picture emerges. In this case, the science told us that the Florida manatee population is growing

in three of the four regions of the State. In the Southwest, where we still have information gaps, the trend is slightly downward. Overall this means the population trends look good. It does not mean we can back off or consider changing course.

Clearly, the Florida manatee is not on the brink of extinction. Serious threats remain. The CBM analyses just as clearly support our assessment that those threats must be addressed before the manatee's future is secure.

Thus, the conclusions drawn in our review and the staff recommendations do not change the need for or make it easier in the future to avoid implementation of manatee protection measures. All existing Federal protection measures including speed restrictions and sanctuaries remain in place and will continue to be enforced. As we assess new data, we will adapt our recovery actions and implement additional protection measures where warranted.

Lastly, recent reporting and rhetoric has focused on only one recommendation – the only one required by the ESA: a change of status – while ignoring the many specific recommendations identified as necessary for recovery. That is unfortunate. Too many people are commenting on a document they have yet to read and limiting their opinions based on news headlines, editorials and self-serving special interest press releases filled with innuendos and deliberate misinformation. None of this moves us toward recovery or benefits the species.

We appreciate the concerns and strong emotional attachments Floridians and others have for the Florida manatee and want to assure everyone that Federal protection for and our commitment to this species has not and will not change.

Twenty years ago few if any believed recovery of the Florida manatee was possible. Thanks to the contributions of many in Florida, we now know recovery of this species is attainable. It's time to celebrate, build on the success of past conservation efforts, and move ahead to meet final challenges. If we do, manatees will always be part of the ecosystem, enjoyed and appreciated by generations to come.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2007 West Indian Manatee Five-Year Review is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/northflorida>.

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