



U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Manatee Recovery Fact Sheet

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the Federal agency charged with protecting the Nation's threatened and endangered species. As such, we receive numerous inquiries from the public every year regarding the endangered Florida manatee. While there is almost unparalleled public support for manatee conservation, there is also much concern about excessive government regulation of development and public activities. Often, the public debate about manatees--whether they need more or less protection--centers on the "facts." With this in mind, we thought it would be valuable to offer the following "Manatee Facts."

Biology

The Florida manatee occurs primarily in Florida and southeastern Georgia. It is usually found in freshwater, brackish, and saltwater habitats. Because manatees cannot survive very long in water below 68 degrees Fahrenheit, south Florida and some natural springs make to the Florida manatee's natural winter range.

Manatees depend on seagrass and other aquatic vegetation for food. In the winter, they congregate around warm water springs and man-made sources of warm water such as power plant discharges.

Manatees can live for several decades. Adult females give birth to a calf about once every three years.

Manatees have few natural predators. The greatest natural threats are exposure to cold temperatures, hurricanes, and poisoning from red tide.

Population Status

No one knows exactly how many manatees there are now or how many there were at any time in history. Aerial surveys are done every year. However, these surveys are inexact because of changing weather conditions, water clarity, manatee behavior, and other factors. As a result, scientists are reluctant to base their evaluations of the manatee population on these surveys. To evaluate the population, we presently monitor statistics such as adult survival rates, reproduction, and population growth rate.

The Florida manatee population is divided into four sub-populations: the Upper St. Johns River (4% of the population); Atlantic Coast (46%); Southwest Florida (38%); and Northwest Florida (12%).

Based on published data for the survival rates, reproduction, and population growth, the Upper St. Johns River and Northwest Florida sub-populations are growing rapidly and doing very well. The Atlantic Coast sub-population is probably stable.

There is little information on the status of the Southwest Florida sub-population, though research is underway.

Legal Protection

Manatees are an endangered species, protected under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Manatees are also protected under the Federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. Both of these laws make it illegal to "take" (i.e., harm, harass, injure, kill, etc.) manatees.

Manatees are also protected under the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act. A state policy in 1989 further identified 13 "key counties" which needed to develop manatee protection plans.

Under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, we have authority to evaluate impacts of development on manatees and their habitat, to ensure that development does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species.

We also have authority to establish manatee protection areas to prevent take (i.e., manatee refuges and sanctuaries), and to enforce State and Federal manatee protection areas.

Problems & Threats from Humans

The most pressing human-related threat to manatees is injury and death resulting from collisions with watercraft. In 2000, at least 78 manatees were killed by watercraft.

Another important threat is loss of reliable warm water habitats that allow manatees to survive the cold in winter. Natural springs are threatened by increased demands for water supply and aging power plants may need to be replaced. Deregulation of the power industry may also result in less reliable man-made sources of warm water.

Seagrass and other aquatic foods that manatees depend on are affected by water pollution and sometimes direct destruction.

Conservation Efforts

Manatee conservation and recovery involves many partners from government and industry, as well as many citizens.

Numerous manatee speed zones have been established by the State of Florida in the bays, rivers, and other waterways of Florida.

Manatee protection planning efforts are underway in many Florida counties. There are State-approved county plans in Duval, Dade, Citrus, and Collier counties.

At this time, seven Federal manatee sanctuaries have been established to help protect the manatees at Crystal River, Florida.

Many sick and injured manatees are rescued every year. These animals are often rehabilitated and returned to the wild. This effort relies on private marine facilities (such as zoos, large aquaria, and oceanaria) and an extensive network of manatee specialists and volunteers.

Recommendations and actions to prevent manatee deaths related to water-control structures and navigation locks have included modification of gate openings and installation of pressure sensitive and acoustic devices on some of the most deadly locks.

All efforts to reduce water pollution help to maintain and restore aquatic vegetation.

Extensive manatee conservation education work has been conducted by Federal, State, and private entities.

Future Recovery Needs

As stated above, four Florida counties have state-approved manatee protection plans. The remaining nine key counties and several others have established speed zones for manatees. However some counties where watercraft-related injury and mortality continue to occur have almost no protective measures for manatees. We believe that all Florida and southeast Georgia counties where manatees regularly occur (in summer or winter) should have appropriate manatee conservation programs in place.

Warm water wintering sites need to be secured. Important spring flows must be maintained in the Upper St. Johns River, Northwest Florida, and Southwest Florida; and other reliable sites must be secured in Southeast and Southwest Florida.

We must ensure that seagrass and other aquatic vegetation are adequate to support a recovered population.

Summary

Great strides have been made in the protection and recovery of the Florida manatee. It is certainly no longer “on the brink of extinction.” However, there is much left to be done to secure its future. This will require the cooperation and support of everyone: government, the private sector, and **you!**

Questions

For more information on manatees and other our manatee activities visit our web site at <http://northflorida.fws.gov>

If you have specific questions, comments or need additional help contact the Jacksonville Field Office at 904-232-2580 ext. 109.