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**Wildlife authorities move to halt manatee harassment**

It's OK to swim with manatees in most areas, but swimmers must keep their distance or risk a citation. Intentionally touching a manatee or doing anything that disrupts the animal's natural behavior is illegal.

State and federal authorities have fielded hundreds of complaints during the past few days in connection with video footage on the Internet that shows people standing on manatees and trying to ride them. Officials hope to put a stop to it by alerting the public that law enforcement officers are watching and are prepared to issue costly citations when they see people harassing manatees.

Seeking out Citrus County's warmwater springs, manatees show up in ever-increasing numbers during the winter months, attracting thousands of tourists. Tour boats and guides operate at peak capacity during this time of year, catering to and assisting visitors eager to see the manatees in their natural habitat.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS or Service) law enforcement officers and biologists work diligently to protect these animals and are supported in these efforts by the local community; including tour-boat guides, dive shops and citizen volunteers.

According to Jim Kraus, the Service's Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge manager, "Our position is that swimming with manatees in local waters is allowable, and limited animal-initiated contact is acceptable. However, in these videotapes there is clearly too much of a good thing."

FWS has established interaction guidelines for how and how not to behave around manatees when in the water.

"We strongly encourage observance of the established guidelines and need the cooperation of all involved to maintain a protective environment that balances education value of these opportunities and the conservation needs of the animals," Kraus said. "Passive observation (observing from a distance) is the best way to interact with manatees and all wildlife."

According to the FWS guidelines, if you are swimming, diving or boating when manatees are present:

- Operate boats at idle and slow speed where posted speed zones are in effect.
- Do not enter designated manatee sanctuaries for any reason. Sanctuaries are in effect Nov. 15 - March 31.
- Observe manatees from the surface of the water and at a distance. Manatees on the bottom are likely to be resting or feeding.
- Never ride, chase, poke or surround manatees.
- Never separate a mother and calf or an individual from the group.

- Avoid excessive noise and splashing that could disturb bottom-resting manatees.
- Use snorkel gear when attempting to watch manatees. The sound of scuba gear may cause them to leave the area.
- Do not feed manatees or give them water.

“The sanctuaries designated in the Crystal and Homosassa rivers are areas where manatees can choose to be away from people where they remain undisturbed in order to rest or conserve energy in warmer water near the springs during cold spells,” Kraus said. “This is why the Service has roped off part of the Three Sisters Springs area.”

Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge was established on Aug. 17, 1983, specifically for the protection of the manatee. The refuge aids in preserving Florida’s most significant naturally occurring warmwater haven for manatees and provides critical habitat for approximately 11 percent of the nation’s manatee population.

The temperature of the water flowing from more than 30 natural springs remains a constant 72 degrees Fahrenheit.

“Manatees are susceptible to cold and hypothermia and cannot survive for extended periods when water temperatures fall below 68 degrees Fahrenheit. These warmwater springs are essential for manatee survival,” Kraus said.

To see how well manatees cope with boaters and visitors, some studies have been conducted and others are ongoing. Research conducted around the Crystal River area since 1990 has shown that the manatees will go to the sanctuaries more frequently when boat traffic increases. According to FWC biologists, these studies also noted some manatee behavioral changes when humans were swimming nearby, including decreased resting and suckling and increased swimming. It is believed that some

manatees will avoid people altogether and others will leave the sanctuaries to seek out human contact.

While these studies show that manatees do respond to boaters and tourists in varying ways, FWS biologists note that to date no significant problems related to cold stress or calf separation have been seen in this region.

Kraus is quick to point out that does not mean harassment of these animals is acceptable.

“Most of the businesses, residents and visitors understand the value these wildlife opportunities afford them and comply with established guidelines and law,” Kraus said. “However, there are some who either are uninformed about or choose to ignore the law and the guidelines. It’s simple: passive observation and limited animal-initiated interaction are acceptable, harassment is not.”

Harassing manatees is illegal under federal and state laws. In general, harassment is an intentional or negligent act which significantly disrupts a manatee’s normal behavior patterns, including resting, feeding and nursing activity.

Law enforcement officers can cite people for harassment or for entering the manatee sanctuaries.

FWC’s Division of Law Enforcement routinely conducts targeted manatee zone enforcement details in all coastal waters of Citrus County.

“These enforcement details primarily target speeding vessels in restricted areas,” said Capt. John Burton, area commander in Crystal River for FWC. “This is where the likelihood of injury or death is highest.”

To minimize the risk of injuries to manatees, boaters should: stay in marked channels; wear polarized sunglasses to improve their in-water vision; obey posted boat

speed zones; use poles, paddles or trolling motors when in close proximity to manatees; have someone help scan the water when under way; and realize that manatees often travel in groups or with their young, so if one is spotted, look for more.

“Boaters should scan the water near or in front of the boat looking for swirls resembling large footprints, a repetitive line of half-moon swirls, a mud trail, a snout or a fluke (tail) breaking the water’s surface,” Burton said.

“FWC also targets complaints of harassment, fishing and swimming in closed areas. Information from concerned citizens is used to help provide more effective enforcement and protection,” Burton said.

To report any wildlife law violations, call 1-888-404-3922. Callers can remain anonymous and be eligible for a reward if the information leads to an arrest.

“We are committed to protecting the manatee and all of our natural resources, as well as the public who enjoys our unique recreational opportunities,” Burton said.

For more information about the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge and the manatee sanctuary locations, visit [www.fws.gov/crystalriver/](http://www.fws.gov/crystalriver/).

Additional information about the manatee and FWC protection efforts is at: [MyFWC.com](http://MyFWC.com). Information on FWS manatee efforts is at [www.fws.gov/northflorida](http://www.fws.gov/northflorida).