

Protecting the Manatee

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Introduction

Hard to believe that sailors once mistakenly thought manatees were mermaids – especially once you see them up close. The manatee is the gentle giant of the waters. They usually reach up to 13 feet long and weigh as much as 1,300 pounds (National Geographic, 2008). A manatee's day is usually spent grazing on underwater plants, thus their nickname – sea cows. They are a distant relative of the elephant. If you use your imagination you can almost visualize it. They tend to be seal shaped with flat, rounded tails. Manatees are mammals so they must surface frequently to breathe air. Adult manatees range in color from gray to brown, while babies are darker and then lighten up as they get older (Van Meter, 1989).

The skin of a manatee is leathery and slightly wrinkled just like the elephant. Occasionally the skin falls off to keep the algae from building up. There is some hair sparsely distributed on the body and whiskers around the face (Van Meter, 1989). Manatees move by thrusting their tails up and down. They steer with their flexible flippers. There are also three or four nails on the end of each flipper to help with their eating (National Geographic, 2008).

The manatee is a quiet, slow moving mammal that has no natural enemies and rarely fights (National Geographic, 2008). Manatees live in freshwater and marine habitats and can move freely between salinity extremes. They can be found in both clear tropical waters as well as muddy rivers. Manatees prefer depths of at least three to seven feet and prefer shallow water if next to a deeper body (Van Meter, 1989). And that is where our problem begins.

Problem

In the waters off Florida, and some other warm climate areas, manatees are attracted to its warmth from both the sun and nearby power plants. Anything below 70 degrees and manatees tend to suffer a little (Save, 2008). Some manatees will move up the Atlantic coast in the heart of the summer as the water gets warmer, but they always find their way back to Florida and destinations further south as the seasons change. The depths of the water near the power plants and other areas where they tend to roam is not deep enough to keep the manatee safe from man and especially boats. More and more manatees are becoming injured and killed by boats that travel through the same waters. Because the manatee moves so slowly they can't get out of the way quick enough. Many manatees can be seen in the wild with severe scars on their backs. Some scientist can even identify a specific manatee by its scar markings.

The manatee is currently listed as vulnerable to extinction. The main threat to manatees in the United States is being struck by boats or slashed with propellers. So it is not a natural enemy like a whale, shark or disease that is harming the manatee, it is man. And it is usually out of ignorance and carelessness as opposed to being hunted. Sometimes manatees can live through strikes with up to 50 deep slashes, however, the wounds are often fatal and the lungs even pop out through the chest cavity (Wikipedia, 2008).

According to marine mammal veterinarians, "The severity of mutilations for some of these manatees includes survivors with severed tails, major tail mutilations, and multiple disfiguring dorsal lacerations." In one observation they cited a small calf with a severe dorsal mutilation trailing a decomposing piece of dermis and muscle as it

continued to accompany and nurse from its mother...by age 2 its dorsum was grossly deformed and included a large protruding rib fragment (Florida Fish, 2007). Manatees also occasionally ingest fishing gear like hooks, and metal weights, but these seldom cause death.

Though the Florida Department of Conservation and other areas that host manatees have done some things to protect them, they certainly haven't done enough, nor can they do it alone. In 2003, a population model was released that predicted an extremely grave situation confronting the manatee in both the Southwest and Atlantic regions where the vast majority of manatees are found. It stated that if boat mortality rates continue to increase at the current rate, the manatee situation will become dire with no chance of meeting recovery criteria within 100 years (Long Term, 2008). In 2007, a University of Florida study found that more than half of boat drivers in Volusia County, Florida sped through marked conservation zones. Little difference was found in driving speeds between ski boats, pontoons, and fishing vessels (Wikipedia, 2008).

Solutions

The endangerment of manatees is different than that of say the elephant or the bald eagle. The elephant has been killed for its ivory and the bald eagle for its feathers. Those are senseless killings without a purpose. But the endangerment to the manatees is for the most part by accident. Just look at them, they offer nothing to man of value, other than just their existence. But the endangerment comes from not knowing, or not being educated on the manatee's nature. Boaters are out to have a good time so they aren't constantly thinking about the whereabouts of the manatees. They simply need to be made

aware. There are those of course that are aware and don't care and those individuals should be handled in a different manner.

There are many things we can do to help save the manatee. First, the most active environmental groups, like the FWC Manatee Program, have been very successful in getting laws in place to protect species and they must do the same for the manatee, however the federal government tends to drag its feet when it comes to placing a species on any kind on watch or endangered list. However, the environmental groups have been so successful that animals like the bald eagle and wolverines are being removed from the endangered species list. The environmental groups and even individuals must work with their state representatives in those areas to have them introduce bills to add additional protection for the manatee. They need to write and email those representatives until stricter laws are in place. The environmental groups carry a strong voice and presence and need to be heard.

Second, we need for those that are responsible for being onsite everyday to be more proactive. The speed limits must be strongly enforced by the conservation police and those limits need to come with steep fines. More conservation police need to be hired. Whether the funds to hire more police come on the state level or the federal level this is an issue that affects the entire globe. But more police need to be visible so that boaters slow down.

Third, waters that host our manatees must be more visibly marked with readable signs warning that boaters are entering a manatee zone. As I go to school everyday my bus passes a construction zone. That sign says "Hit a worker, \$10,000 fine." That seems to be pretty effective. According to the Illinois Department of Transportation, since that

law went into effect in Illinois the number of construction related deaths and injuries have gone down considerably (Transportation, 2008). In my opinion, this is also an easy fix for the manatee. If boaters are threatened with a \$10,000 fine, they're going to slow down.

Fourth, we need to come up with something that can be placed in manatee zones that will discourage boaters from entering those areas and yet at the same time will allow the manatees to swim freely. Whether these are metal poles spaced widely or some other submersible, something needs to be in place to discourage the boaters.

Finally, boaters must do their part to protect the manatees. In addition to watching the speed limits they should also wear polarized sunglasses, which will help see below the water's surface and stay in deep water channels avoiding shallow sea grass beds where manatees might be feeding (Humane Society, 2008).

Conclusion

Boaters that disobey the speed limits and hit manatees are no different than those that don't slow down when there is a puppy in the road. The manatees don't know better, and they're not afraid enough to avoid the danger. The burden rests on our shoulders to fix this problem. I think it is important that we spread the word about manatees. Make sure all boaters in those areas are well aware of the dangers, tighten and enforce the laws, and just be aware.

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