

# Florida manatees

## A Florida treasure

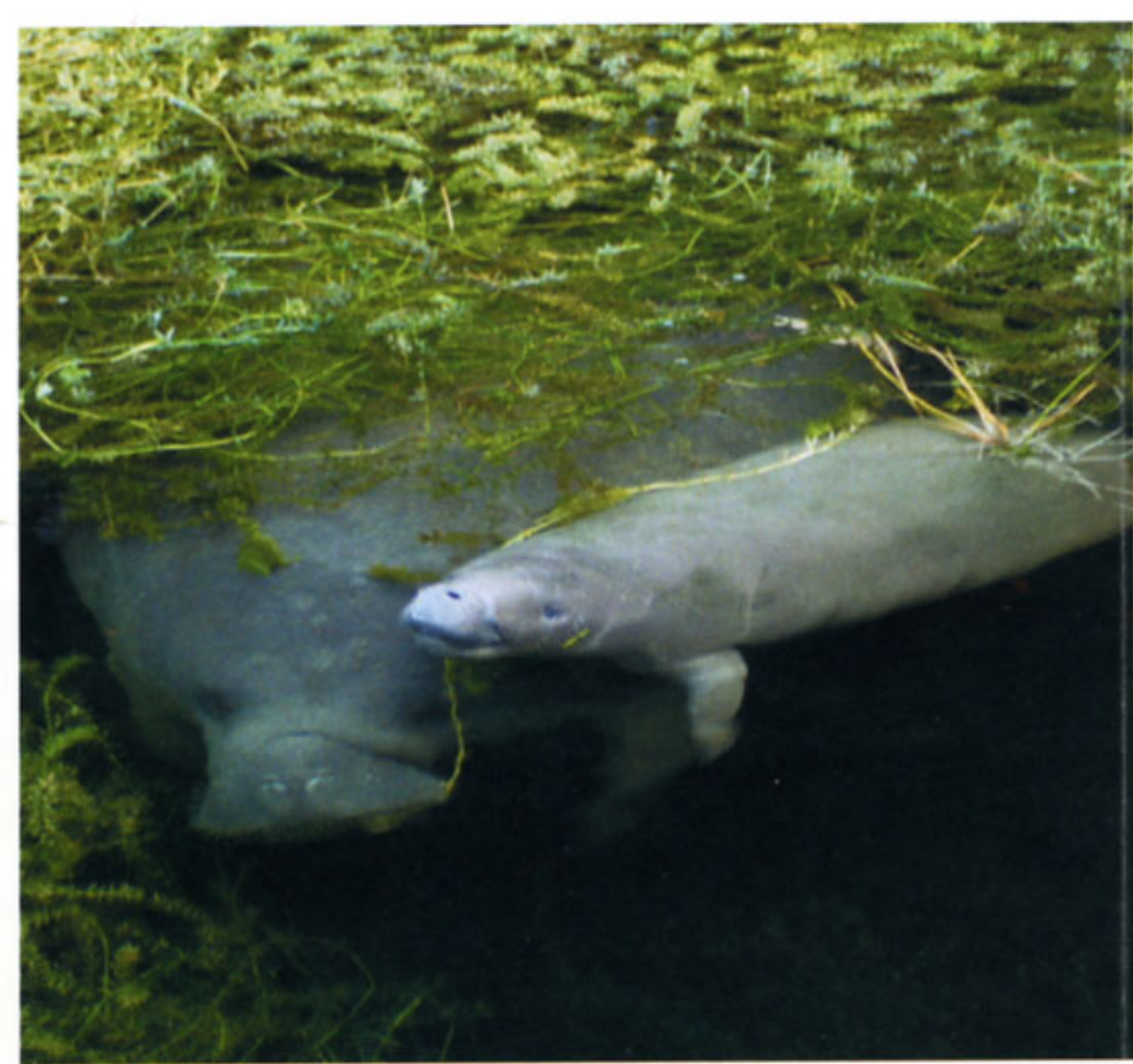


**Guidelines for boating,  
diving and snorkeling  
around manatees**



Florida Fish and Wildlife  
Conservation Commission

[MyFWC.com](http://MyFWC.com)



Tom Scott

A sea cow and calf graze on hydrilla (*Hydrilla verticillata*), a nonnative invasive plant.

## What can boaters do?

You can reduce your chances of harming manatees by following these simple guidelines:

- Observe and follow all boating speed zone signs.
- Slow down. Reducing boat speed gives you a greater chance to avoid manatees and for them to avoid your boat.
- Use marked channels when boating. Manatees have shown signs that they are avoiding heavy boat traffic areas. Channel depth reduces the likelihood of pinning or crushing manatees.
- Wear polarized sunglasses while operating a boat. Polarized lenses make it easier to see an object beneath the surface and the “swirling” that occurs when manatees dive. (The swirls look like a large “footprint” on the water’s surface or a series of half moon swirls.)
- Give a proper lookout when boating. A proper lookout keeps you aware of what is in front of or near your vessel. Look out for wildlife, other boaters, dive flags, swimmers or other obstructions when you are underway.

## What can divers and snorkelers do?

As divers or snorkelers, you are directly entering the manatees’ habitat. By following these simple guidelines you can minimize your impact:

- Do help protect manatees. The underwater environment is a unique place to visit – please respect its inhabitants.
- While swimming or diving, do not chase any manatees you see. If an animal stops feeding, comes toward you, swims away from you or changes its behavior, you may be too close.
- Do not disturb resting manatees. Manatees that are resting may surface to breathe about every 20 minutes and can rest at any time during the day. Observe resting manatees from a distance.
- Never poke, prod or stab manatees with your hands, feet or any object.
- Use snorkel gear when diving near manatees as the sound of air bubbles from scuba gear can disturb them. Manatees must conserve energy in order to stay warm during the cold weather. Practice passive observation.
- Do not separate a cow and her calf if you swim near manatees. The calf needs its mother to survive.
- Enjoy observing manatees in their natural habitat. Passive observation ensures that manatees are able to behave naturally.

## Manatee harassment

68C-22.002 Florida Administrative Code: Manatee harassment is defined as, “any intentional or negligent act or omission which creates the likelihood of causing an injury to a manatee by annoying it to such an extent as to significantly disrupt normal behavioral patterns which include breeding, feeding or sheltering. The intentional provision of any type of food to manatees not in captivity shall be considered harassment under this definition, unless authorized by a valid federal or state permit.”

Section 379.2431(2)(d) Florida Statutes: Except as may be authorized by the terms of a valid state permit issued pursuant to paragraph (c) or by the terms of a valid federal permit, it is unlawful for any person at any time, by any means, or in any manner intentionally or negligently to annoy, molest, harass, or disturb or attempt to molest, harass, or disturb any manatee; injure or harm or attempt to injure or harm

any manatee; capture or collect or attempt to capture or collect any manatee; pursue, hunt, wound, or kill or attempt to pursue, hunt, wound, or kill any manatee; or possess, literally or constructively, any manatee or any part of any manatee.

Under 1994 Amendments to the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), harassment is statutorily defined as, any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which –

- (Level A harassment) has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild; or,
- (Level B harassment) has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering but which does not have the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild.

To avoid charges of harassment, DO NOT do the following activities:

- give food to manatees
- use water to attract manatees to your boat, dock or marina (etc.) where manatees may be harmed
- separate a cow and her calf
- disturb manatee mating herds
- pursue manatees or chase them from warm water sites
- disturb resting manatees



Manatees have a flexible upper lip with stiff bristles that help draw food to the mouth.

- hit, injure or harm manatees
- jump on, stand on, hold on to or ride manatees
- grab or kick manatees
- block a manatee's path if one or more moves toward you
- hunt or kill manatees
- use your vessel to pursue or harass manatees
- "fish" for or attempt to hook or catch manatees

### Boating speed zones

To alert the boater and protect manatees, the law provides regulatory zones on waterways. Here are typical signs found on Florida's waterways.



#### Idle speed zone

Designates a protected area where boats are not permitted to go any faster than necessary to maintain steerage and make headway.



#### Slow speed zone

Designates a protected area where boats must be fully off plane and completely settled and level in the water while moving.



#### No entry zone

Designates a protected area that prohibits all entry, including boating, swimming, wading, fishing and diving activities.



#### Safe operation zone

A sign indicating that you may resume safe boating speed; visible as you leave a protected area.

**Please report manatee harassment by calling the FWC Wildlife Alert hotline 1-888-404-FWCC (3922).**

## What is a manatee?

The Florida manatee, a subspecies of the West Indian manatee, is a large grayish-brown aquatic mammal. Its sausage-like body tapers to a flat, paddle-shaped tail. Close to its head, a manatee has two flippers with three to four “fingernails” on each flipper. The head and face are wrinkled, and the area around its mouth has stiff whiskers, called vibrissae.

Adult manatees average about 10 feet in length and about 1200 pounds. They have been known to reach lengths over 13 feet and weights over 3,000 pounds. Calves are three to four feet long and 60 to 70 pounds at birth.

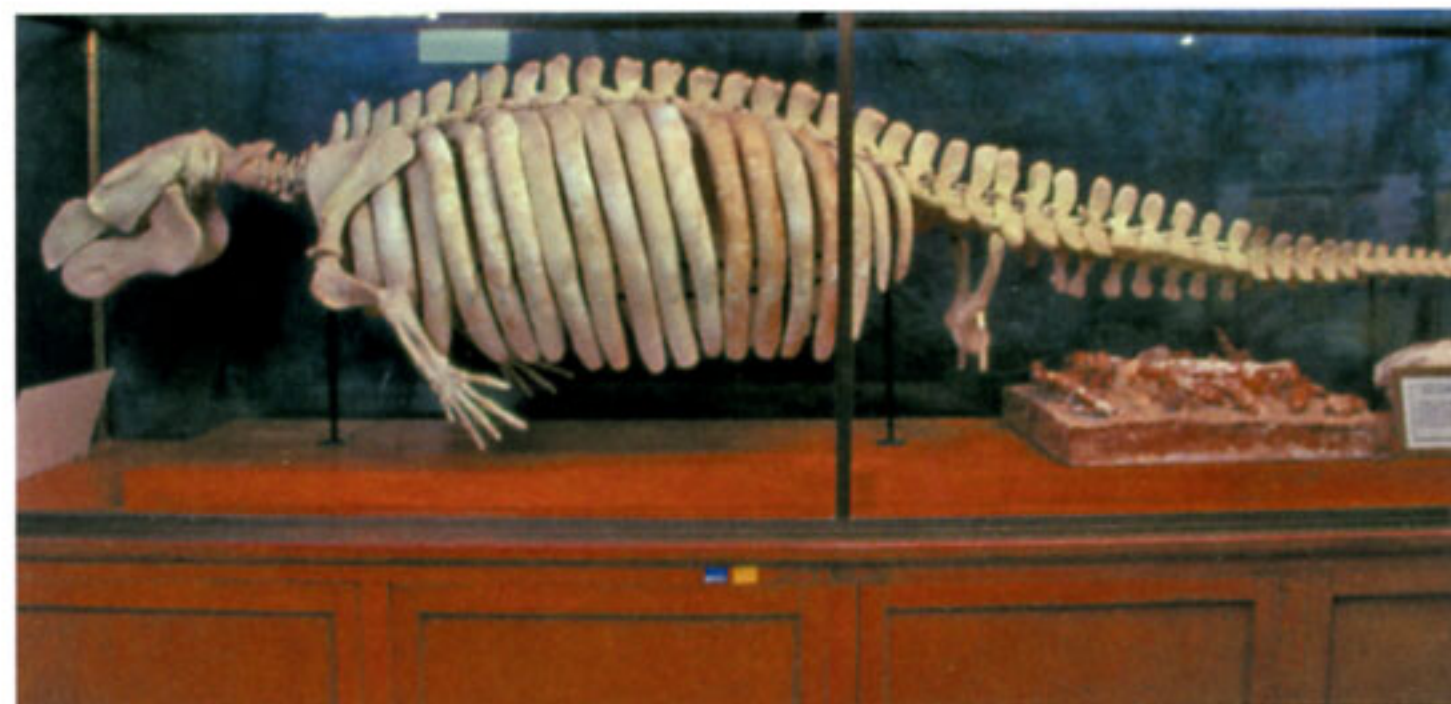
Manatees spend most of their time feeding and resting. They graze on aquatic plants along rivers, coastal areas and at the water’s surface. Manatees may hold their breath for as long as 20 minutes, but they usually surface about every three to five minutes to breathe.

The population of Florida manatees is believed to be at least 5,000 animals. Some threats to their survival include the loss of suitable warm-water habitat due to a decline in spring flow, impacts with watercraft and the anticipated loss of thermal refuges currently provided by power plants.

## Manatee life span and survival

Manatees are mammals. The maximum life span of manatees is approximately 60 years. Based on age data collected over a five-year period, the average age of the manatees that were killed by watercraft was seven years. Researchers have found that female manatees mature sexually between three to six years of age, with the action or process of giving birth to offspring at four to seven years; typical first calf is at age five years. After breeding starts, females

usually produce one calf every two and a half to three years, which denotes slow reproductive potential. The loss of viable female manatees in the breeding phase of their life cycle further impacts the overall manatee population. To help manatees survive, please follow the guidelines in this brochure.



Bonnie Abellera

Miocene sea cow/dugong (*Metaxytherium crataegense*)

## Manatees are native to Florida

The fossil above is a skeleton of an animal that inhabited the shallow bays and rivers of Florida 15 million years ago. It was discovered in a quarry in northwest Florida and donated to the state in 1929.

A study conducted during the 1960s, which used test animals from Florida’s existing native manatee population, tried to determine if manatees could be used to control weeds in Florida waterways. The study found that even though manatees could help with weed control, it was not an effective way to do this job; it was too hard to catch manatees or keep them in targeted areas; and there were not enough manatees to keep up with the rapid growth of aquatic weed species.

## Manatees and the law

Manatees are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, the Endangered Species Act of 1973 and the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act of 1978. It is illegal to feed, harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, annoy or molest manatees.

Florida, as well as the federal government and some local governments, has established regulatory speed zones to protect the manatee and its habitat.

Anyone convicted of violating state law faces maximum fines of \$500 and/or imprisonment of up to 60 days. Conviction for violating federal protection laws is punishable by fines up to \$100,000 and/or one year in prison.



K. Parker

## How you can help

- Watch manatees from a distance
- Avoid personal contact with wild manatees
- Respect the manatees' need for space and shelter
- Participate in coastal cleanup events
- Recycle monofilament fishing line – do not throw it in the water where it can entangle manatees, birds and other marine life.
- Attend boating safety classes or take online courses
- Purchase a specialty “Save the Manatee” license plate or manatee decal from your tax collector’s office when you register your vehicle or vessel. License plates are also available online at [BUYaPlate.com](http://BUYaPlate.com).



To report manatee deaths, injuries, harassment, accidents or orphaned manatees, call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Wildlife Alert number: 1-888-404-FWCC (3922).

Boating safety classes: [MyFWC.com](http://MyFWC.com)



### Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

*Division of Habitat and Species Conservation  
Imperiled Species Management Section*