



MANATEES in Louisiana

BY JILL WILSON

Imagine yourself afloat in a watercraft, peacefully swaying in the waters of any marine or estuarine system in the southeastern portion of our state.

As you look down, you catch a glimpse of an aquatic creature nine feet long with a barrel-like body that tapers to a large spatula-shaped tail. Its finely wrinkled skin is gray to gray brown and covered with fine, sparse hairs. It has a small head, flattened in profile. An upper jaw with a deeply split upper lip extends beyond its lower one. Stiff, bristly whiskers adorn the mouth.

Two small, almost human-looking eyes peer out from the head. No external ears are visible, but there are two forelimbs like rounded flippers, and no hind limbs. Sound like the sort of thing legends are made of? It is. The West Indian manatee, thought to be the source of legends about mermaids, is being sighted more and more frequently in Louisiana's waters. With



Photo by Gaylen Rathburn/USFWS

already diminished population numbers, manatees are something of a living legend themselves. Unless we continue to protect their habitat and decrease the instances of man-made mortality, these special creatures may some day be a thing of the past.

The West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), is a docile marine mammal, typically nine to 10 feet in length and weighing approximately 1,000 pounds. Adults may grow as large as 13 feet, and weigh more than 3,000 pounds. Manatees are members of the order *Sirenia*, collectively called sea cows. The name *Sirenia* is taken from the Greek *seiren*, sea nymphs who allured sailors with their sweet songs.

Upon first glance, the bulging, bulbous appearance of these mammals has not always brought them high regard. However, their gentle nature is a characteristic that has gained manatees widespread appreciation. They are completely harmless and nonaggressive, and are often shy and reclusive, although they can also be playful at times. Manatees have no natural enemies, so their decline and endangerment is especially tragic. Many mortalities

are human-related, such as collisions with watercraft, drowning in canal locks and flood control structures, ingestion of fish hooks, litter and monofilament line, entanglement in crab trap lines and vandalism.

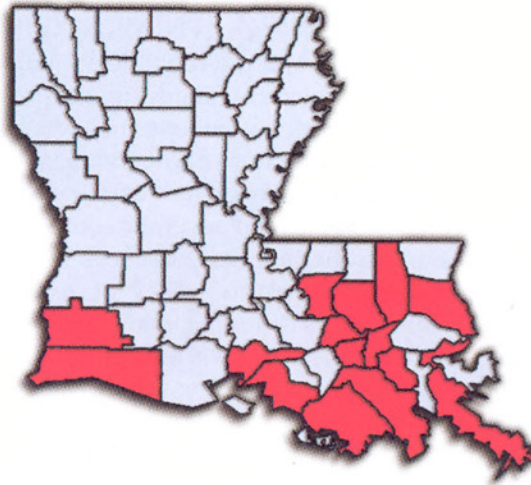
It is believed that manatees can live for more than 60 years, and several decades at the least. As herbivores, manatees eat a variety of aquatic plants. They graze for food along water bottoms and surfaces, and much of their diet varies with availability. With all of this eating, usually up to 100 pounds a day, their teeth are replaced as they are worn out. Manatees are intermittently active day and night, with most of their time spent eating and resting.

Manatees' beaver-like tails propel and steer them, and assist them in banking and rolling. Their skin is thick and often pocked with scars from boat collisions. In fact, individual manatees are easily recognizable by these scars. The nostrils atop the squarish snout close when underwater. Manatees surface to breathe every few minutes when active, and every 10-15 when resting. They have limited depth perception, but can differentiate colors. They hear well, though without external ear lobes, directional hearing is limited. Manatees emit sounds within human auditory range. They often squeak and squeal when frightened, playing or communicating.

Manatees are basically solitary, but can be moderately social. Females, who sexually mature around the age of 10, engage in promiscuous mating, and breeding occurs throughout the year. Sheltered bays, coves and canals are especially important for reproductive activities. The gestation period is approximately 13 months, and the young, which are born in water, usually consist of a single calf, although twins have been reported. A newborn calf can swim and surface on its own within half a day. The calf then rides on its mother's back, and begins to eat some vegetation within a few months. A calf may remain dependent on its mother for as long as two years. The interval between births for an individual cow may be between three to five years, shorter if the calf is lost.

Manatees inhabit freshwater, brackish and marine habitat, and can move freely among all such waters. They are often found in open marine water, bays, and rivers, as well as shallow, slow-moving rivers, estuaries and canals. In coastal areas, they are particularly drawn to areas

Parishes in red indicate the historical and current distribution of manatee sightings in Louisiana.



where seagrass beds flourish. They prefer water at least four to seven feet in depth, and usually avoid areas with a strong current. Because of their eating habits, they are usually found in waters with dense submerged aquatic beds or floating vegetation. With no tolerance for cold waters, manatees stick close to the coastline, near shores. Manatees appear to be intolerant to prolonged exposure to water below 68 degrees Fahrenheit (20 degrees Celsius). When the water gets colder and they fail to migrate, the animals basically starve from loss of appetite.

Manatees are found along the northern Atlantic coast of South America, the Caribbean coast of South and Central America and the Greater Antilles. During warmer months individuals disperse from Florida as far west as here in Louisiana. The current West Indian manatee population in the southeastern United States is estimated to be at least 1,850, possibly more than 2,000. This population is mainly concentrated in Florida year-round. The warm

Florida waters provide wintering refuges for manatees in warm water springs. Manatees are also attracted to warm water outflow from power plants.

Between 1929 and 1994, there were only 19 reported manatee sightings in Louisiana. However, that number has increased since the mid-1990's, especially in and around the Lake Pontchartrain basin. Amazingly, in 1990 a manatee was recorded in Louisiana as far as the Amite River. Current records indicate 58 manatee sightings in Louisiana for the years 1995-2001. According to Gary Lester, biologist manager of the LDWF Natural Heritage Program, most Louisiana manatee sightings are east of the Mississippi River. Quite possibly, the river serves as a barrier for them. For this reason, Lester and the Natural Heritage Program are relatively sure that the manatees sighted in Louisiana visit us from Florida's population.

Despite these increased sightings in Louisiana, the overall manatee population is still in danger. There are numerous reasons for the decline of this gentle species. Historically, manatees were overharvested for their meat, fat, and tough hides and are still hunted for food in South America and some parts of the Caribbean. Poaching, vandalism and harassment by boaters and divers continue to be a problem, but habitat loss and pollution have also negatively affected manatee populations. One of the most rampant and disturbing threats to manatees is the occurrence of collisions with boats and barges. Of course, natural factors such as unusually cold weather, outbreaks of red tide and a low reproductive rate have influenced population levels as well.

The manatee gained federal endangered status in 1970. Additionally, the manatee is protected under federal law by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which make it illegal to harass, hunt, capture or kill any marine mammal. Conservation efforts besides protection against harassment include public education, enforcement of no wake zones in manatee areas, annual population monitoring and tracking the animals during dispersal.

The Natural Heritage Program has recently launched a community awareness program to make sure that the increasing numbers of manatees using our waters are protected. Since a primary cause of mana-

Many manatee mortalities are caused by propellers. Unfortunate sights such as this one can be avoided if boaters reduce speeds and remain on the lookout for manatees.

Photo courtesy of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Committee



tee mortality stems from heavy boat traffic, boaters in areas where manatees are frequently sighted should reduce boat speeds. Speed limits in these waterways can help manatees by giving them enough time to respond to the danger and avoid collisions; also, reduced speeds can reduce the severity of collisions if they do occur. Warning signs will be placed in areas with frequent manatee sightings to remind boaters of this need. When on the water, observe all signs and be aware of the potential presence of manatees, when appropriate.

It is also important to remember some dos and don'ts when in the company of these creatures. For starters, wear polarized glasses and be on the lookout for manatees. Avoid boating over seagrass beds and shallow areas. Manatees are slow, near-surface swimmers, so powerboats that speed through their feeding grounds pose a considerable threat. Always recycle or throw your litter in a proper container. This applies to fishing line and hooks as well; always dispose of these properly. If you spot a manatee, stay at least 50 feet away from it. Do not touch, feed or otherwise molest the animal.

To learn more about manatees and current sightings in Louisiana, or if you sight one contact the LDWF Natural Heritage Program at (225)765-2821 or visit their website at www.wlf.state.la.us.

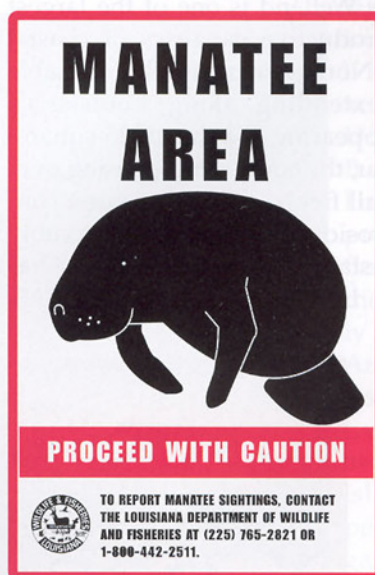
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Photo by Jim P. Reid/USFWS

Powerboats are a great threat to manatees, who are slow, near-surface swimmers. A recent project in Florida to capture, tag and release manatees found that many bore scars from encounters with speed boats.

LOOK FOR THIS SIGN



At left, a manatee uses the pads on the sides of its mouth to pull vegetation in while feeding. Manatees spend many hours a day grazing and may eat up to 100 pounds a day.

Beginning this summer, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will place signs in waterways most often inhabited by manatees. Boaters are encouraged to slow their boats and keep a sharp eye out for manatees that might be grazing on or near the water's surface. If you are lucky enough to spot a manatee in Louisiana, please call (225) 765-2821 or the LDWF Operation Game Thief Hotline at 1-800-442-2511.

For additional information regarding West Indian manatees, visit the LDWF website, www.wlf.state.la.us, and click on La. Natural Heritage Program, Threatened and Endangered Species, and Manatee. More information can be found at www.floridaconservation.org/manatee.