

**Guidelines for protecting
native wildlife**

Florida Manatees

For all boat, personal watercraft and
paddle-sport operators and for divers
and snorkelers



Everyone has a shared responsibility
to protect Florida's resources and
pass on to future generations
the beauty, wildlife, water and
natural resources we have today.



**Florida Fish and Wildlife
Conservation Commission**

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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 1,200 pounds. They have been known to reach lengths over 13 feet and weights over 3,000 pounds. A newborn calf is three to four feet long and 60 to 70 pounds.

Manatees spend most of their time feeding and resting. They graze on aquatic plants along rivers, coastal areas and at the water’s surface. When resting, a manatee can hold its breath for as long as 20 minutes; when active, it must surface to breathe about every three to five minutes.

The population of Florida manatees is believed to be at least 6,000 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 known life span of manatees is over 65 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 female manatees in the breeding phase of their life cycle further impacts the overall manatee population.



Karen Parker, FWC



Manatee habitat

During the year, manatees live in many aquatic habitats, both fresh and salt water, preferring rivers, springs, estuaries, bays and canals found throughout Florida. These aquatic mammals cannot endure water temperatures below 68 degrees for extended periods. As a result, manatees seek refuge in Florida's natural springs and warm-water discharge canals near power plants during the colder months.

Activities that anyone can do:

- Watch manatees from a distance to limit disturbance.
- Participate in coastal cleanup events.
- Attend boating safety classes or take online courses.
- Call the FWC Wildlife Alert number to report entangled or distressed manatees.
- Support manatee conservation efforts by purchasing a specialty "Save the Manatee" license plate or manatee decal from your tax collector's office when you register your vehicle or vessel.
- Recycle monofilament fishing line – do not throw it in the water where it can entangle manatees, birds and other marine life.



What can boat and PWC operators do?

Boat and personal watercraft (PWC) operators can protect manatees by following these simple guidelines:

- Observe and follow all boating speed zone signs.
- Slow down. Reducing vessel speed gives you a greater chance to avoid manatees and for them to avoid your vessel.
- Use marked channels when boating. Manatees have shown signs that they are avoiding heavy boat traffic areas. Channel depth reduces the likelihood of pinning, crushing or hitting manatees in shallow waters.
- Wear polarized sunglasses while operating a boat. Polarized lenses make it much 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.

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.



What can paddlers do?

If you paddle a kayak, canoe, or paddle board in or near beaches, springs or other waterways, you too are responsible for looking out for Florida's wildlife. When you paddle in an area where manatees are known to travel, eat, mate, or rest, please follow these guidelines:

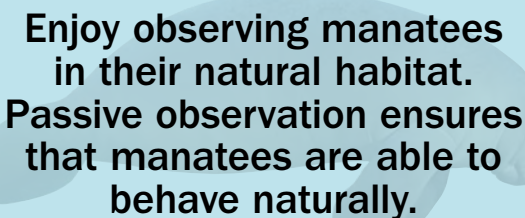
- Enjoy watching manatees but remember to keep your distance and limit your viewing time so that the manatees do not notice you or your vessel.
- Use caution when paddling near seagrass beds, sanctuaries or refuge area boundaries as manatees will be entering or exiting these areas. Give manatees space to move freely in their habitat.
- Avoid approaching or surrounding any manatees that you or others in your group come upon. Back away until you can observe the animals from a distance.
- Wear polarized sunglasses so that you can see where manatees are located underwater.
- Speak quietly and avoid making loud noises when you are near wildlife areas to avoid disturbance.
- Paddle your vessel so that you avoid traveling over resting manatees. Manatees must surface to breathe and will startle awake if you are in the way.
- Research equipment attached to a manatee helps researchers locate and monitor the manatee for further study or health reasons. This equipment does not hurt the animal and should not be touched or removed.
- Offering food or water to manatees is prohibited because it alters their foraging behavior and is considered a form of harassment.
- Lower your anchor slowly when you want to secure your vessel as there may be resting manatees below that you may not see.

- It is okay to take pictures of manatees—please do not lift, touch, hold on to or pose manatees for your pictures.
- Be a good role model for others so that they learn how to watch and enjoy manatees without disturbing the animals.

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 disturbance.

- Do help protect manatees. The underwater environment is a unique place to visit – please respect its inhabitants.
- Do not pursue or chase any manatees you see. If an animal stops feeding, swims toward you or changes its behavior, you are too close.
- Observe resting manatees from a distance. Manatees that are resting may surface to breathe about every 20 minutes and can rest at any time during the day. Manatees must rest to conserve energy in order to stay warm during cold weather.
- Never poke, prod or stab manatees with your hands, feet or any object. Share the joy of wildlife viewing with others and teach them about the importance of not disturbing animals.
- Use snorkel gear when diving near manatees as the sound of air bubbles from SCUBA gear can disturb them.
- A manatee calf needs its mother to survive. Do not separate a mother and her calf if you swim near manatees.



**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 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:

- 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
- hit, injure or harm manatees
- jump on, stand on, hold on to or ride manatees
- grab or kick manatees
- block a manatee’s path
- hunt or kill manatees
- use your vessel to pursue or harass manatees
- “fish” for or attempt to hook or catch manatees

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.

The state of Florida has also 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.

Report collisions with manatees

You will not be cited if you accidentally collide with a manatee while obeying speed zone restrictions. Please report boat or PWC collisions with manatees as soon as possible to increase the manatee's chance of survival. In many cases, injuries do not kill manatees immediately.

To report manatee deaths, injuries, harassment, accidents, or ones orphaned or distressed

**Call the FWC Wildlife Alert number:
888-404-FWCC (3922)**

**#FWC or *FWC on cell phone,
or text Tip@MyFWC.com**



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