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MANATEE STATUS – A CONFUSED STATE, OR A STATE OF CONFUSION?

MANATEES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN a paradox for me, so the recent commentary on this site by Captain Bob Sabatino (Vol. I, No. 2) raised some interesting points that gave me food for thought, the mental digestion of which has since prompted this piece.

A few months ago, I nearly choked on my coffee when I broke into laughter after reading a (Fort Myers) News-Press cover story re: “Florida Wildlife Commission chairman says, . . . manatee numbers will be reduced . . . over my dead body.” In his delivery of this daring statement Rodney Barreto relied on the data that has been compiled rather recently by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission biologists. His words were based on questionable science developed over the past three decades by the agency and its predecessor. At issue, and the basis for Mr. Barreto’s death-defying statement, is at what population level will it be declared via the wisdom of the Commission that our Florida manatees, now classified as a subspecies of the West Indian manatee, have reached “recovered” status? We never hear much these days about this marine mammal’s historical population in Florida. Have facts been hush-hushed to create an aura of jeopardy? Only guarded information, mostly about how mortality from a variety of causes, is impacting this “Endangered,” or “Threatened,” or “Recovered” (take your pick) species, reaches the public at large after it is spoon-fed to the media.

Here are a few important facts we hear or read little about these days — you may draw your own conclusions.

1. Fifty-one years ago, when I worked for the old U.S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in Naples, manatees were not . . . I repeat . . . not . . . as abundant in our waters as they are today. Laboratory staff members were constantly on the water and I don’t recall one instance, or can I find any references in my field diaries from that period, when anyone ever reported seeing a manatee, like was the case when one of them happened to spot a sea turtle or a manta ray. As Bob Sabatino stated, in those days alive or dead manatee observations were a big deal and made the local newspapers — it was that unusual. True, a smaller human population

with less boating activity equates to fewer sighting opportunities and fewer deadly impacts between water vessels and manatees. It would seem, therefore, this would also result in lower carcass counts. But, no one was counting those manatee carcasses or collecting any data to establish a baseline for the assumptions used by the scientists of today who offer ungrounded models in an effort to substantiate their current assumptions. In those days the State of Florida was not counting manatees, nor were the Feds or any university-associated people. Frankly, government and academia didn't concern themselves with manatees in those days. Things changed a little when Florida manatees were introduced into some freshwater canal systems in the sixties to assess their ability to control water hyacinths. This proved to be a fruitless approach, so manatees again became a "forgotten species." In the fifties the total manatee population in Florida was an unknown quantity but anyone who lived here then and who has a smidgen of common sense knows it was far below today's numbers in terms of total population.

2. At the local level, prior to the Florida Power and Light Company constructing its Caloosahatchee/Orange River generating plant, the manatees in our regional waters had no winter warm-water refuge, nor did they quickly "learn" of its whereabouts after the power plant went on line. For years, until they learned to "home" to the heated effluent, most regional manatees who lingered here during the cold months remained at the mercy of natural fluctuations in water temperatures and sometimes many died as a result of hypothermia and probably pneumonia (i.e., 1962).
3. Anyone with a Cracker's common sense, and who's been on the water since before our local power plant and others were built in Florida, knows that the manatee population has since soared (recovered?) over the last 50 years. This marine mammal has reached a remarkable and an apparently sustainable high number despite soaring mortalities.
4. Very, very severe "red tides" — in 1947 and as recently as 1971 — did not result in mass manatee mortality. It wasn't until a moderate red tide outbreak in 1982, which entered the Caloosahatchee estuary, that the brevetoxin released by the red tide "organism" was scientifically documented and tied to the death of a manatee(s). Simply expressed: more manatees — more red tide-related deaths.
5. Over the last 50 years manatee reproduction has positively compensated for even the accelerated morbidity of the species because of the upward spiraling interaction with boating traffic. One just has to look at and

compare total population data from recent aerial survey observations and tallies to see this trend.

6. Fifty years ago some Florida residents were still killing and eating manatees but they weren't easy to find — there just weren't many of them around to fall prey to a gig or a gillnet or a rifle! Historically, it seems logical that people of European origins had not populated South Florida long enough and attained a dense enough population to have nearly extirpated the Florida manatee because of the demand of their subsistence needs, by 1956. Egad, there probably weren't 396 manatees in all of Florida that year — that's how many are known to have died statewide just last year alone!
7. The extinct Calusa people who once populated this region in moderate numbers were a hunter-gatherer society. We know that they harvested and consumed every living thing that our estuary and near-shore waters produced. They were also craftsmen who utilized shell, wood, and bone, BUT they apparently did not use manatee flesh as a food item nor any manatee parts in their artifact production. Despite what one official government website claims, bone from recent manatees (the same form that has been present in Florida waters for at least a few centuries) has never been discovered in those Calusa mounds that have been systematically excavated by archaeologists. Examples of fossilized manatee-like bone from an ancient extinct manatee relative have been unearthed from sites that were created by archaic people who predated the Calusa and who dwelled in Southeastern Florida. This is highly suggestive that there weren't enough manatees in Florida's waters 1,000 years ago to be harvested by Native Americans.



L-R — Leslie LeBuff, Ray Carner, and Chuck LeBuff with an orphaned baby manatee I had rescued near Captiva, in 1969. Despite my frantic, all-out, nationwide search for someone or a marine mammal exhibit/rehabilitation facility to help me save this tyke — no individual or institution would step forward and accept the challenge to take it. Although Florida first passed legislation to protect manatees in 1893, as recently as 1969 no one or no entity seriously gave a damn about manatees. Photograph from *Sanybel Light*.

In my opinion the Florida population of West Indian manatees have never really been endangered or threatened — instead they have been enjoying a steady upward growth curve. Their population levels exploded about 40 years ago — it indeed surged because of their environment's enhancement and their increased survivability through our creation of additional and artificial warm-water refuges. I can find no early European references to manatees being in our waters. There is some debate whether the “seals” described in the history of Ponce de León's 1513 Florida voyage and visit to the Dry Tortugas were West Indian monk seals, or manatees. I believe the animals his crews killed there were the now extinct seal, not manatees. The Castilian seafarers were very familiar with seals from the waters of the Mediterranean. However, they were unfamiliar with the manatees sailors had encountered earlier when the European maritime expansion reached the coast of West Africa and in 1492 the newfound waters of the West Indies — they superstitiously described them as “sirens.”

In review, this all suggests to me that very small numbers of northward migrating manatees from the Caribbean basin, those representing the rootstock of the present Florida population, reached Florida sometime after the early 1500s. They most likely first became established near spring-fed rivers, outside the domain of the hungry Calusa, where they could successfully overwinter and survive the cold. In Florida, the range of spring water temperature is between 68°F and 75°F, above the manatee morbidity threshold. Now, 500 years later, their population has grown to about 4,000 individuals. Despite the growing variety of human-related and natural hurdles they have had to surmount over the last 150 years in South Florida the species has fared extremely well.

What does the future hold for the manatee in Florida and the U.S? Undoubtedly, because of global warming, the distribution of the Florida manatee will include a successful, overwintering breeding population in the Chesapeake Bay by 2707 and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence by 4507. By then, their take may even be regulated by standard fishing regulations in Florida — like snook and alligators are in today's world. I know and I have

interviewed to a few people who still live around these parts that have eaten manatee flesh. They tell me they remember it as being tasty — much better than alligator, but not as good as snook.

Charles LeBuff

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