

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT



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Florida Manatee

Fondly known as “sea cows,” Florida manatees, a subspecies of West Indian manatees, graze on seagrass beds off the eastern and southern U.S. coasts. When offshore waters dip below 68 degrees F, these gentle giants, which are susceptible to hypothermia, migrate to warmer waters—mainly along the Gulf Coast—such as freshwater springs and areas warmed by power-plant discharges.

Spared from impacts of the BP oil spill, manatees represent a long-term conservation success—though one that needs vigilant care to maintain.

Florida first protected the animals in 1893 by prohibiting manatee hunting. But as the state developed, water quality declined, degrading seagrass habitat, and boat strikes killed increasing numbers of manatees, which the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) listed as endangered in 1973.

In 1983, FWS created the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, a series of warm, freshwater springs that has become the largest winter preserve for manatees on Florida’s Gulf Coast. Thanks to this reserve and other state and federal protections, the species was downlisted to threatened in 2017. Today, roughly 8,000 manatees navigate Florida waters.

But human and natural threats remain. In 2018, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission reported 824 manatee deaths due to cold stress, boat strikes and a vast toxic

A young Florida manatee nuzzles its mother as others loll nearby in Florida’s Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge.

algal bloom, or “red tide,” that alone killed nearly 300 manatees.

Climate change and resulting storms and sea-level rise also threaten manatee habitat by damaging seagrass beds, tainting freshwater springs and potentially forcing power plants—which provide warm-water havens—to relocate away from the coasts.

Protecting and restoring habitat, such as reestablishing natural water flow through the Everglades, would help manatees survive environmental change. “If we make an investment to improve water quality that will allow seagrass to recover,” says Jessica Bibza of the National Wildlife Federation’s Gulf Restoration Program, “we’ll increase food and habitat for manatees for a long time to come.”

—*Kristan Uhlenbrock*