

Man versus Manatee

Curt Mobley goes face to face with
Trichechus manatus latirostris



Few creatures in the history of seafaring have engendered such terror in the hearts of sailors as the fearsome manatee. These loathsome leviathans—the big ones reach a length of thirteen feet and weight of 3,000 pounds—enjoy nothing more than speeding through the water like torpedoes and ramming any ship in their path, like Moby Dick did when he sank the *Pequod*. Once common from Texas to the Carolinas, hunters and speed boaters have employed both bullets and propellers in a nearly successful effort to exterminate these vicious varmints. Only 3,000 are left, and many hope that it will soon be possible to transfer them from the endangered species list to the extinct list as real estate developers join in the battle via accelerated habitat destruction.



Rising from the depths in search of prey.



Attack posture: ears back, fangs bared

During the summer, manatees, like their cousin mammals the killer whales, lurk just offshore in search of food, consuming over one tenth of their body weight per day. Indeed, who knows how many surf fishermen, scuba divers, and sea kayakers currently listed in police records as “missing, presumed drowned, body not recovered” in fact may have fallen prey to these diabolical denizens of the deep? During the winter, they invade the warm, spring-fed rivers of the Florida coast, thereby denying humans the opportunity to seek refuge from the bitter Florida winters by basking in these natural hot tubs. And there it was that I came face to face with a few dozen of these underwater Jabba the Hutts during a recent business trip to Florida.

After the work was done (and not on the taxpayers’ nickel), I persuaded my good friend and colleague T, who previously had survived an encounter with these hideous herbivores, to guide me

on a expedition to see one up close and personal. We arose at 4 AM and drove north from St Petersburg to the Crystal River on the west coast of Florida. After donning wetsuits (as though they would provide any protection against an attack), we set out in a small boat and headed upriver. I sat in the bow and looked for telltale boils of water indicating that a manatee was leaving the bottom somewhere ahead, no doubt planning to rise up and overturn our frail craft like the hippopotamuses do to dugout canoes in the old Tarzan movies. After a mile or two, T's experienced eye spotted manatee signs—indeed, the signs said “Manatee Sanctuary/Do Not Enter.” No sooner had we dropped anchor than a monster at least eight feet long appeared from the depths and began rubbing against the anchor line in a coldly calculated attempt to drag our boat underwater. Quickly realizing our predicament and my uselessness, T courageously jumped into the water and began scratching the beast behind his flippers so as to distract him from our boat while I donned my snorkeling gear and prepared for the worst.

——— *and now for reality* ———

Within minutes I was swimming among a dozen or so manatees in the clear waters. Never have I seen such amazing animals up close. They are completely unafraid of snorkelers. Some manatees simply ignored us and continued to sleep on the bottom or gracefully swim around like slow motion versions of giant seals. Others would approach us to within arm's length so that we could scratch them. There is a spot behind their flippers they can't reach, and they are most appreciative of getting scratched there. After an initial underarm treatment, they often would roll over onto their backs so that we could rub their tummies—not a small job considering that they have a couple of square yards of tummy. Several times I had a manatee the size of a large livingroom couch come up and literally make eye contact with me from one foot away (their eyes can be either brown or blue). You would not want to do that with a great white shark or a rhinoceros! I can think of no other wild animal so large yet so gentle. It was a truly spiritual experience to have such encounters with animals that outweigh the average bear by a factor of five, yet behave like characters from a Disney movie.



Snorkeler and manatee



Mother and child

There are some who feel that swimming with manatees is not good ecological practice because it may stress the animals. However, I saw no signs at all that we were disturbing them in any way. Everyone in the area was scrupulous about not provoking them in any way, not making sudden moves that might startle them, and certainly not feeding them. The real problem is habitat destruction and powerboaters who refuse to travel at no-wake speed. Manatees often bask at the surface and a speeding boat can cut them to pieces before they have a chance to dive. Most of the 20 or so adults I saw had gruesome propeller scars on their backs. A record 95 manatees were killed by boats in 2002, and that is just the ones we know about. Just before we arrived, a helicopter illegally hovered at tree-top level over the manatee sanctuary, which panicked the animals. I can only hope that someone got the tail number so that the FAA and Fish and Wildlife folks can track it down. The pilot will probably get off with a warning, but I personally would impose the maximum penalty of \$50,000 fine and a year in jail for harassment of an endangered marine mammal, just to give the pilot incentive and time to contemplate his place in the global ecosystem.

In 1996, 20% of all remaining manatees died from a combination of factors, including collisions with speed boats and poisoning by a toxic algal bloom (a red tide). This was an enormous hit for a species already nearing extinction. In spite of such losses, a well organized and well funded coalition of Florida power boaters and real estate developers is trying to get manatees removed from the Florida state and U. S. federal endangered species lists. This would allow for higher speed limits in the rivers and bays where manatees congregate during the winter, and would allow for more destruction of the shoreline so necessary for their survival. I just wish such people actually had to live in the devastated, urbanized world they are trying to create. There are plenty of places to build new houses and water ski without destroying the last few refuges for these magnificent creatures which rightly have been called the gentlest animals on earth. As of January 24, 2003 an agreement has been reached among various environmental organizations, the boating and development industries, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which will provide for additional protected areas in several Florida rivers. Nevertheless, only time will tell if the agreement is implemented in good faith. The best place to follow this ongoing battle is www.savethemanatee.org. Your letter might be the one that persuades the politicians to help nature fight the battle against pure greed for the last bit of Florida wilderness.



Habitat destruction where manatees used to roam. This modest bungalow is just across the Crystal River from the manatee sanctuary, which is behind me as I took the photo.

Above all: don't make a winter trip to Florida without taking a swim with these unique mammals. You'll never be the same again.