7 Saving Florida's manatees

Experts discuss conservation efforts to save Florida's manatees.

Narrator: It's a warm, sunny day in Florida. You decide to celebrate the beautiful weather by going out on your boat. While enjoying the sun and sea, you hear an unfamiliar sound. Looking out into the water to investigate, you spot a huge gray animal. Should you panic? Call for help? Of course not. Consider yourself lucky. You've just seen a manatee. . . . The West Indian manatee is a large aquatic mammal that looks like a blimp. Manatees, found in Florida as well as in parts of Central and South America and West Africa, evolved more than sixty million years ago. Their closest living relative today is the elephant. . . . The average adult male manatee weighs about a thousand pounds and can eat up to ten percent of its body weight in aquatic plants each day. Harmless and generally friendly to people, manatees have no natural predators. And with a normal life span of sixty years or more, you might think you would find a great many manatees in Florida's warm coastal waters. Unfortunately not. During the last survey, only twenty-six hundred were counted in the United States. These animals are being threatened by a variety of factors. . . . Their natural habitat has been reduced as a result of constantly expanding development, and what's left may be contaminated by pollution. Each year a large number of manatees are killed or seriously injured by fast-moving watercraft. Because manatees are slow and often swim near the surface, the propeller blades of speeding boats have too often been a cause of serious injury or death. Recognizing the threats to these creatures, both the United States government and the state of Florida have declared the manatee an endangered species, and today many efforts are being made to protect them and to increase their population. . . . One such effort is the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge. Within this forty-six-acre site are several islands and bays devoted to providing and preserving habitat ideal for manatees.

Eileen Nuñez,
Park Ranger: There are several natural warm-water springs within King's Bay, which is where the refuge is located. And those warm-water springs provide the manatee a winter habitat in this area.

Narrator: Manatees, like people, will die of hypothermia if left in cold water for too long a period of time. They depend on these warm-water sources for their survival.

Eileen Nuñez: One way to recognize manatees in the area is by their telltale footprint on the surface of the water. They make a smooth, circular shape with their tail as they're swimming along. So when you see a smooth circle on the surface of the water, that usually means that there's a manatee nearby. Another sign to look for is the manatee's snout as they come to the surface to breathe. . . . They must breathe when they're active during the day every two to four minutes. And when they're sleeping and resting, manatees will generally come up and take a breath every fifteen to twenty minutes.

Narrator: In addition to preserving habitat, another way to help protect manatees and other endangered species is to educate the public. . . . Here at Homosassa Springs Wildlife Park, visitors can see Florida's wildlife up close in its natural environment. They can also learn why animals such as manatees are being threatened.

Betsy Dearth,
Park Ranger: Now, out in the wild, a lot of manatees get hit by boats and barges. We have one in here named Amanda – big scars on her back from being hit by a boat. They also get caught in crab traplines and fishing lines.

Narrator: During the summer months, many manatees leave the warm springs and move north along both coasts – sometimes ranging as far as Alabama in the Gulf of Mexico, and North Carolina and Virginia on the Atlantic coast. These migrations are being followed closely by researchers at the Florida Marine Research Institute.

FMRI

Researcher: Sometime here in February . . . uh . . . manatees return . . .

Narrator: Information they gather will help policy makers develop better strategies for protecting the manatee in the future. For more than thirty years, Dr. Buddy Powell has been studying manatees in Florida and in other countries such as Belize. He says research there helps them understand more about Florida's manatees.

Buddy Powell,

Ph.D., FMRI: It's been very, very interesting working there because we feel like we're actually getting a really good idea of what manatees would do in the absence of a lot of human activity. And again, that can relate back to how we think about manatee conservation in Florida.

Narrator: Another important part of the manatee conservation effort is to rescue and rehabilitate injured animals, then return them to their natural habitat. Here at SeaWorld® in Orlando, teams work to nurse manatees back to good health.

Randy Runnells,

SeaWorld®: We are the largest rehabilitator of manatees. Uh, we quite often get as many as twenty animals a year that . . . we . . . go through our rehab program.

Narrator: The efforts of the veterinarians and biologists at SeaWorld® have paid off. Today three manatees, now back in good health, are being returned to the wild. . . .

Recently, the manatee population has been gradually increasing as a result of the efforts of many people. So why is it important to continue to spend so much time and money on this seemingly insignificant creature? Perhaps it has to do with our own well-being.

Man: I think they're kind of like a sign of how the environment's doing. And if manatees can survive alongside us, I think our environment's going to be doing well.

Woman 1: We're not only providing and protecting habitat for a wildlife species, but we're also preserving a healthy habitat for ourselves.

Woman 2: We're the ones that have to do something about it; otherwise, our children and their children might not see manatees.

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Narrator: To find out more about the manatee and what you can do to help save this gentle giant, visit the Save the Manatee Club on the World Wide Web at www.savethemanatee.org.