

## **General Rescue Guidance for Small Manatees Observed Alone in the Wild**

It's an unfortunate fact that some manatee calves are occasionally orphaned in the wild. In addition to our personal and professional obligations, the Florida manatee's legal designation affords it special status that requires our concern for the welfare of these individuals. As wildlife professionals, it is our responsibility to accurately identify these dependent animals and to provide appropriate assistance.

The intention of this guidance is to outline an objective and rational approach to deciding if a small manatee observed alone is abandoned, and detail the steps necessary to assess the animal before a rescue is initiated. This document encourages consultation with manatee veterinarians and information gathering to ensure that calves are not taken from the wild unnecessarily. Making decisions with respect to rescuing these individuals may have some undesirable consequences. The integrity of the cow-calf bond, potential calf mortality, and a significant human commitment of time and effort, will likely affect the decision to capture an animal or not. Hastily rescuing a calf means the commitment has been made to feed, care for, financially support, and house the animal, potentially for many years, in an artificial environment. Although the reintroduction of manatee orphans has been documented with great success, there are still no guarantees, as each individual and circumstance is unique.

Dependent calves (generally <450 lbs. and <200 cm in total length) that are obviously injured, emaciated, or otherwise debilitated can be easily assessed in the field and appropriate actions can be taken. Calves that are in relatively good condition and are observed alone in the wild prove to be more difficult to assess and handle. Therefore, an accurate assessment of the situation is crucial to the decision making process.

The public often initiates the process early on by reporting a small manatee that appears to be abandoned or separated from its mother. Citizens' input can provide valuable information about the particular animal, including length of time observed and the animal's behavior. If possible, supplemental information should also be collected such as the presence of additional animals and typical manatee behavior/usage patterns for the area. Confirmation of this information by more than one individual increases its reliability (this process should be well documented).

As field personnel assess the situation, at least four different criteria should be evaluated: the animal's condition, the animal's behavior, environmental conditions, and local manatee abundance and behavior.

Assessing the animal's condition should include a weight and length estimate as well as respiratory rate and effort. Skin and body condition can also provide clues to the status of the animal in question. Older dependent calves that become orphaned are typically not noticed until they are in poor body condition, while infant calves may be in reasonably good body condition. A newborn manatee will have a prominent umbilicus and a creased tail with floppy or scalloped margins.

The animal's behavior should be evaluated. This may be obvious from the onset, or may take some time to assess and require further observation. Recently orphaned animals in good physical condition may be actively swimming, wondering, or searching. They may be seen sampling or ingesting non-food items such as leaves and twigs off the bottom or marginal food items like algae off the side of natural or man-made objects. Animals orphaned for longer periods of time or environmentally stressed (such as with cold water temperatures), are usually sedentary and oblivious to wind and wave action. These animals are physiologically depressed and may be life-less to comatose. These cases require immediate attention, as time is of the essence. It is suggested that animals should not be offered food or liquids unless recommended by the consulting veterinarian.

Environmental factors and local manatee habits should also be part of the fact-finding portion of the process. Air and water temperatures and wind and wave action are important considerations. Both air and water temperatures can easily be taken. Recent weather conditions may explain the situation but the forecast weather conditions could dictate your actions.

Local manatee habits are closely tied to the environmental conditions. Calving and nursing areas are broadly seasonal and most often are found in quiet and protected canals and rivers. Nurseries generally have more than one calf present and usually have one to several older animals in the vicinity. The cow-calf bond is very strong in manatees and rarely do multiparous females "park" a calf and leave it for any extended time (although known individuals have been observed doing this in the wild while foraging or engaging in other activities.) Cows may also become temporarily separated from their calves due to human factors, such as a boat disturbance or temporary flood control structure closings. Every effort should be made to verify that the mother is not in the vicinity. If abandonment cannot be determined with certainty, rescue attempts may be delayed with continual calf observation, pending consultation from a vet and diagnostic and physical exam results. The calf may be marked with a grease marker to aid observers in locating the animal.

Decision-making is based on information offered from the public, as well as objective data (weight, length, water and air temperature, etc.) and subjective data (age, behavior, environment, and local population habits). All facts and information are not equal and some may weigh more heavily than others in the decision-making process. Even with this logical approach, the correct decision may not be obvious. In these situations, vet and experienced biologist consultation is required and further observation may help clarify the picture. An aggressive weighing of all the facts is necessary, however, when in doubt, and all things are equal, keep the best interest of the individual at heart, and facilitate a rescue.

Each situation involving a small manatee observed alone in the wild is unique. Differing scenarios require the facts to be evaluated and weighed differently. At best, this guidance provides an approach to making a rational and objective decision. Uncertainty in these

decision making situations is a fact of life but it can often be overcome by consulting the vast accumulated experience of our interagency partners.