'Animal,' Episode 3: Manatees

0:01

hey it's Michael today we have something really special for you a blissful break

0:06

from the news it's a new series from nyt audio called animal my colleague Sam

0:14

Anderson from the Times magazine traveled the world to have encounters with animals not to claim them or to

0:21

tame them but just to appreciate them each episode is a journey to get closer

0:28

to a creature that Sam loves for the next 6 weeks we'll be running this limited series every Sunday here on the

0:35

daily feed but if you want to hear all the episodes right now you can search for it wherever you get your podcasts

0:43

today episode 3 hope you enjoy

0:51

it from The New York Times this is animal I'm Sam

0:57

Anderson episode three [Music]

1:12

manatees all right morning good morning how are you

1:17

hey I'm all right how about yourself good we picked a great day I know come

1:23

on what are the rules on that yeah it's the rain's not an issue that it's the lightning and I got a

1:30

app on my phone here that's yeah we got definitely have some lightning but it's it's their call obviously and but I'm

1:36

I'm not comfortable going out if there's if there's a lot of lightning you you don't want to be on the water during

1:42

during lightning yeah so but so you all booked a private tour yeah okay um

1:50

Kelsey yeah I think Kelsey's going to join us she just texted me for some reason I do not fully understand I've

1:57

always wanted to get in the water with a

2:03

manate a manatee is a big pudgy blubby looking I don't know cross

2:11

between a walrus and a potato sometimes people call them sea

2:17

cows cuz they basically just float around grazing but they're a lot weirder

2:22

looking than cows they have these funny little flippers sort of boomerang shaped

2:28

flippers up front front that they use to navigate around and then this big flat

2:34

paddle of a tail like a super Beaver or something they eat wet vegetables

2:42

seagrass mainly almost never aggressive they kind of float outside

2:49

all of these cycles of predators and prey and doing stuff they just float

2:56

there and I sort of want to float outside all of those cycles and just not worry

3:04

about deadlines and meetings and [Music]

3:11

whatever it's stressful out there but not under the water looks like

3:17

they're sending people out yeah they'll they'll be watching the weather okay so

3:23

when I think about getting in the water with a manity I don't know exactly what I want

3:29

to happen happen but when I really try to imagine it I think what I want is for a manity

3:35

to look at me I want to see a manity seeing me I

3:42

want to look at a manity and I want the manity to look back at me and I just want to have a moment of

3:50

connection or whatever it is people said they were ugly oh yeah now

3:56

manatees are a protected species and the only place I know of in the

4:03

United States where you can legally swim with manatees is a place in Florida

4:08

called Crystal River you too I'd heard about that place from watching the

4:14

classic manity documentary made by jacqu custo back in the

4:20

1970s and jacqu custo and his whole crew

4:25

of French oceanographers with their little red beanies they have a local guide and it's a kid

4:33

teenager named Buddy Powell this is you in your in your element yeah this is my element here and Buddy Powell is

4:42

actually still there in the decade since he's become maybe the preeminent manity

4:48

scientist in the world and he's the director of a big Marine Center not far from Crystal River

4:57

and he occasionally will still take people around Crystal River where he

5:02

grew up as he did for jacqu custo what is this this is liability Assumption of

5:07

risk so we arranged a private boat tour with Buddy Powell me and my colleague

5:13

Caitlyn Roberts who is there with the microphone cover alligators Buddy's PR

5:20

prison Kelsey is going to join us too she's running a little late one more com okay not here yet no she's close though

5:27

all right guys well we're going to go ahead and get started so Caitlyn and I had actually been in Florida for about a week before this

5:35

swimming day crisscrossing the state talking to various manity experts kind

5:41

of getting ready for that moment when I get in the water and have an encounter

5:46

everyone here is for 1015 correct and once you start as soon as you start

5:51

learning about manatees things get pretty heavy because from a distance manties make me very happy and I find

5:58

them very soothing manatees I don't think experience life that way which we found out very quickly

6:05

we have out on the bay we talked to a guy who works with the save the manatee club and he paddles around in his canoe

6:13

and he recognizes all the manatees by their Scars by the damage

6:19

that they've taken so manatees are they're huge

6:24

animals they float slowly and often right near the surface and so when a

6:30

speedboat comes ripping through often it will it will hit a manate and getting hit by a speedboat is

6:37

basically like getting hit by a truck that has swords all over it so he's seen

6:43

manatees sliced up so badly they don't have tails or hit so hard by a boat that

6:49

their ribs are sticking out just the worst of the worst he also told us some

6:55

really freaky stories about alligators that I'm not going to get into right now but yeah so you'll need to uh get wet

7:03

suits and snorkeling gear here so just rent it and then you'll need to

7:08

watch watch a video okay um manity manners manity manners okay okay where

7:16

else do we go we went to this Pathology Lab in Tampa where they actually do

7:25

autopsies on every manate that turns up dead in Florida uh to figure out the reasons

7:33

why and they've been seeing a huge increase in the number of

7:40

manaties that are coming in sometimes it's just days on end you know 8 nine 10

7:47

manatees and when they open up the door the next day it's just that many manatees again and it's just kind of

7:54

non-stop the boat strikes there's something called red tide

8:00

uh which is a kind of algae that blooms in the water under certain conditions

8:05

and makes manatees drown and then lately they've been seeing something really horrible which

8:11

is a kind of new front in this crisis which is starvation finding manatees with sand in

8:18

their stomachs because they're just desperately rooting around trying to find any bits that they can

8:24

eat because the water quality has become so bad that these huge seagrass Meadows

8:32

where manatees have been feeding for hundreds and thousands of years are dying off and so they go there to eat

8:41

and it's just fields of sand should we get out on the boat if you got to watch

8:47

the the um oh we have to watch Manatee manners

8:53

yeah welcome to the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge and the Kings Bay Manatee Refuge

9:00

you are among I kept asking these experts like how do you deal with this emotionally is it

9:05

hard do you cry areas and the following activities or

9:11

the attempt to perform any of the following activities is prohibited throughout King's Bay chasing or

9:17

pursuing aity a lot of them were able to have a kind of scientific Detachment

9:24

they're just really trying to diagnose what's wrong and help as best they can

9:29

Corner oround man um but I remember one guy I spoke with he surprised me a little bit I said

9:37

you know do you have hope for the future of manatees poking proding or stabbing a

9:42

manate with anything including your hands and feet and he said deep in my heart no standing or stepping on a

9:51

manity come on now but he said he's still deep in his heart no but he still

9:56

hopes separating a mother and cat or separating a man he also said if we can't save manatees we can't save

10:03

anything because manatees are so resilient giving a man they have really

10:08

tough skin that's hard to cut they have very fast coagulation in their blood so

10:14

their their wounds heal very quickly which is how they're able to survive so many of these boat

10:19

strikes and so if we can't find a way to keep Humanity alive then we're not going

10:25

to be able to save anything let's do it

10:31

Visitors by following and disturbance while

10:37

increasing your opportun oh who Scot I

10:43

know to be honest that kind of makes me hate us for wanting to swim with

10:49

manatees well the people that don't follow the regulations yeah but even us in our stupid wet suits floating around

10:55

in the crowds of people staring at the man just like shut the whole thing down

11:01

well hopefully people you know will feel a sense of all and want to protect them

11:09

and right yeah guess that's like the the risk benefit ratio you have to

11:17

weigh yeah like how much does this increase people's awareness and affection therefore lead to protection

11:24

and all that how much does it bother Humanities and

11:30

mess up the environment yeah exactly that's why there has to be I mean also a lot of regulation on the torque guides

11:36

too so after we signed all of our forms and squeezed into our wet suits and

11:42

watched this video we stepped outside and the sky had cleared

11:49

miraculously and we got ready to step on this boat where buddy was going to drive

11:55

us around and hopefully make my stupid manity dream come true why don't we go

12:01

go over to the boat and then we can get after you so you can go

12:09

[Music]

12:24

back plunk these have you driven one of these rep

12:29

sir I have okay so you understand that stream of water that needs to come out of the side of that motor at all times

12:35

so what to do buddy pow the local guide if you're ready to go I'll get you un

12:40

hook all right thanks thanks a lot gets us in our boat and we toodle off into the

12:46

water this is where you grew up this is where I grew up uh I I was actually born

12:52

in Clear Water um but my family had a like a little fishing Cottage up here

12:57

and and so we came I wanted know all about his Jac custo experience and uh

13:03

what that was like were you aware of jacqu custo at this point in your life yeah I mean back back in the day when we

13:09

only had three channels right you know you would sort of wait you know whe they come out like four times a year or twice

13:14

a year it was like a big deal to watch that show so obviously you know very much a role model to be a kid who loved

13:23

nothing more than being in a boat who had memorized all the creatures that

13:29

lived in this habitat that he grew up in um to get a call from jacqu custo in the

13:35

1970s when that name was as big as a name could be kind of like that yeah especially for a kid like that and so

13:42

they kind of adopted me and took me under their wing and um you must have

13:47

felt like a little rock star it was pretty incredible that's that's for sure um did you did you wear the little red

13:54

hat I I did really I did indeed

14:00

did you ever try smoking a pipe I never tried smoking a pipe no did you drink some wonderful French wine um I have

14:08

definitely at that age um they were trying to cultivate my inner frenchness and yes

14:16

I uh drank my fair share of of wine and it was a wonderful experience cuz I it's

14:23

just absolutely fabulous and of course that just changed my entire life so I'm

14:29

going to be keeping an eye out you know as we're going along uh for manatees but

14:37

um I wanted to tell you a little bit of about what we're seeing here so this

14:42

this whole Crystal River and so yeah he's steering us all over his childhood

14:49

territory and he's of course able to say you know this used to be like this and this used to be like that and now

14:55

there's a giant mansion here and that's when they begin now he said the water

15:02

used to be I mean it's called Crystal River because the water used to be crystal clear and now it's pretty murky

15:09

in most of it the water quality has really plummeted and you used to

15:15

see none of the of the boat traffic that we were seeing that day you would not see groups of tourists

15:22

out there looking for manatees it was just it was just buddy and the manatees all alone back in those days what are

15:28

these little heads that I keep seeing popping out of the water uh those are turtles he's you know I keep seeing

15:33

things in the water I you see like a little something pop up from the water and I'm like manate but he's like nope

15:39

that's a turtle and something would jump out of the water and just be a fish of

15:45

but then at one point he did say there there it is 11:00 mhm so you can see the

15:52

series of them and one in front of the other so it's just slowly swimming along

16:00

that's right and we saw this manate off to the left of the boat so we don't want to disturb it cuz it's there it's coming

16:06

up to surface see the back there's the back of it so that's a

16:11

nice adult Manatee the tail we saw the see its back

16:17

come up and then its tail and it would leave these what buddy called tail prints on the water that's so you could

16:23

sort of follow where it was going and and it was really thrilling to see one

16:29

so far from just doing its natural thing does it still feel special for you to see a manate oh yeah I um it's it's hard

16:40

I to explain it but every time I see a manity I get I still get excited about it and I can watch him

16:49

forever so back you know back then so we're we're cruising around he's taking us down little little side

16:56

Coes and as we're cruising around we keep seeing these guys are probably with

17:02

one those guys over there are probably with one these other tourist boats and

17:07

crowds of people in the water and that was the fastest way to find a manate

17:13

it's kind of like when you're a Yellowstone the fastest way to find a bear is to find the the traffic jam of

17:20

people looking at the bear on the side of the road here there were traffic jams of boats and crowds of tourists who were

17:27

floating with pool noodles and you know flippers and goggles and

17:32

and they're all just kind of hanging around a manity while it's

17:38

eating I don't know I feel almost inclined not to get in the water with a big crowd of people staring at one

17:44

manity yeah I can understand so we're kind of keeping our distance because once I see that it's not it's not what I

17:53

imagined for my manity encounter somehow it does not feel to me like um

18:00

outside of the the Predator prey hustle and bustle chain the S of oh one

18:07

whoa two propeller marks on it two prop [Music]

18:13

marks can you tell what size that one was it's a small adult he hanging out at the bottom

18:23

feing can you describe what the scene looks like uh

18:30

well we got 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

18:37

8 plus boats out here full of people in wet suits then we've got groups of

18:44

people in wet suits with pool noodles and snorkel sticking up who are in the

18:50

water kind of face down all in a in a tight cluster we

18:55

assume staring at one manity we've got two or three groups of people like

19:01

that um yeah we've got boats with docked

19:10

outside of houses boats with huge huge powerful looking

19:20

Motors this this boat has two giant Motors on the back two big Honda Motors

19:26

and as you can see he's cir he doesn't realize that that there's a manity and as you can see you can see the bottom

19:32

it's not really that super shallow that [Music] shallow so he could be doing some damage

19:39

well he's going slowly enough that that man manate will you know will move out of

19:45

the way um but um if he wasn't going slowly yes

19:52

absolutely and not only that is just a matter of disturbance too these you know

19:57

these animals they become somewhat habituated but generally they just you know they want to be left alone to you know to

20:06

feed so this Conant we basically did this all day we see a manity it would be

20:12

surrounded by a crowd and I would say let's try another one and finally the

20:17

day was over I was sunburned we had to take the boat back and we went into this little

20:27

Lagoon and and there was a manity and there was a crowd of people around it I

20:32

don't know Kelsey how do you feel do you want to jump in I mean I'm hot so yeah yeah yeah me

20:39

too I thought about it and decided okay I guess we should probably just do it we

20:44

could do it here yeah yeah since we know we're here came all this way I don't want to miss my opportunity

20:52

and regret it later so I guess I'll just just kind of quiet back in here be one

20:57

of the crowd and get in there what do you think let's try it these guys are

21:03

kind of harassing him a little bit and uh and sometimes buddy would point out

21:08

like H they're kind of harassing that manate you're really not supposed to be that close or you're not supposed to be

21:13

swimming after it you just stay still and let it do what it wants and you don't follow it you don't interact you

21:21

just look very slowly start told me to just float like a log when I get in there and just try to stay at least

21:29

he me but I'm like where' it go A manity or two length away from it okay what if it

21:36

approaches then you just stay still

21:42

um and let it do it's its thing and like I said just pretend to be another object

21:49

in the water okay

21:59

all right so Sam I'm probably going to stay up here maybe you can um you can kind of tell me what you're doing as

22:06

you're doing it as you're getting in the water all right well I'm going to put this snorkel

22:14

on and uh take my shoes off okay so there's two

22:21

right here just feeding and uh so what you don't want to do is disturb them in

22:27

any way and just be as quiet as you possibly can keep a keep an eye on keep an eye on me

22:35

CU I can obviously that's the reasons I don't get in the water is I can spot and see further away and so I'll sort of

22:42

give you directions I don't like to yell out over the water okay but just occasionally just lift your head up and

22:48

take a look at me keep an eye out for alligators I'll tell you if one comes

22:55

fun came out for us appreciate that yeah [Music]

23:19

so that one still over

23:24

there so I you know I was I was in my wet suit already I put on my flippers

23:29

and my goggles and my snorkel and got in the

23:34

water so 72 degrees doesn't feel that warm it's kind of chilly

23:41

water so I get in and the water is is very murky there's a lot 11:00 Straight

23:47

Ahead 12:00 11:00 there's there's a lot of plants a lot of seagrass and so it's

23:53

just like MC and seagrass and I can't really see where I'm going

24:00

but I know the general direction the manatee is in and Buddy is kind of shouting out you know it's at 11:00 and

24:06

he's guiding me across the water so I'm kind of just swimming with

24:13

a face full of murky seagrass and I can't see where I'm going and I'm not

24:19

sure if I'm going anywhere and then all of a sudden it was such a shock all of a sudden

24:28

I come shooting out of the Merc and I'm just I'm like on top of the manate

24:34

practically I did not see it coming by the time I saw it I was there and it's

24:40

it's eating facing away from me and so I come to a stop basically

24:48

right next to its gigantic tail which I know from my manate

24:55

research is so strong and potentially dangerous and so I was instantly kind of

25:09

panicked but I also knew that rule number one of being near a manate is that you can't panic and thrash around

25:15

because you'll scare the manate and then it will potentially thrash and so I had to sort of work as hard as I could to

25:22

stop my momentum as quickly but as gently as I could until until my momentum stopped

25:30

just like inches from the manate tail and I was able to kind of scooch

25:36

backwards very slowly until I was a few feet away Sam is about a manate away

25:43

from the manatee one manate length away and then

25:48

I just watched I just stared because this thing

25:53

was so otherworldly almost like Ghostly pale

25:59

kind of gray color almost like glowing in the light

26:04

and it's just peacefully eating grass and all these other people are around me

26:10

but we're not noticing each other at all cuz we're all just so in awe of this manate

26:19

really and I don't know how long I floated

26:24

there but for a pretty long time and then I decided all

26:31

right I saw a manate didn't turn around and look at me

26:36

which I mean why would it but that was

26:44

okay so very gently I turned and I swam through the Merc back to the boat

26:55

and just as I was starting to tell everybody what I had seen one of the one of the

27:02

little crowd watching the manate eat shouted it's turning it's coming your

27:08

way really and I turned and the manatee had turned around and was

27:14

swimming directly toward our boat oh my

27:24

gosh feeding along the bottom there I get back or no up to you be very very

27:31

quiet and so I just gently let go of the ladder and dropped back under the water to see what it was going to

27:38

do and the manatee came right over to me and started grazing the

27:44

seagrass right next to our boat kind of down below my flippers and so I just floated there

27:53

suspended watching it

28:05

and then after a few seconds the most magical thing happened which is the manate stopped

28:13

eating and it tilted its body up vertical and it floated up toward the

28:21

surface and it paused and it looked at

28:26

me like it really looked me in the eyes and I was looking

28:31

at the manity and the manity was looking at me and I always fantasized about this

28:39

moment and all the many feelings that would pass between us and we just kind of beam warm feelings back and forth to

28:45

each other I felt in the man's gaze I felt

28:53

nothing there was no magical Soul connection and that was that was good and normal

29:01

and the fantasy I had was abnormal and I should probably talk to

29:07

my therapist Susan about it on Friday at 1:

29:13

[Music] p.m. and so it kept drifting up and it

29:19

took a breath and then it went back down with

29:25

bubbles coming out and it tilted itself back to horizontal and

29:32

it started just swimming past me and under the boat and this thing was so huge it took

29:39

forever it felt like it felt like it was swimming in slow motion I just watched its whole pale glowing body kind of pass

29:47

right in front of my face peacefully gracefully and it's huge tail came by

29:56

last and then it was

30:05

gone under right under the boat and I went back up to the surface this one here was so close speeding right there

30:14

came up surface right in front of me to [Music] breathe looked at

30:20

me which that was my goal I wanted to be looked at by a manity look deep into your soul no she didn't yeah

30:28

and I really was so jazzed I really was it was it was it was very

30:34

profound it just looked at me how are you feeling right now I feel

30:41

good feel happy horrible yeah I feel like weirdly fulfilled like a life

30:48

mission has been fulfilled what was it like it was I don't know sweet the

30:54

people were sweet wonder where that manity is now harass I bet it's right near the same

31:00

spot eating eating grass taking a nap

31:07

farting sending bubbles up to the surface big jowls shaking while it chews

31:15

it's lettuce it's grass

31:25

[Music]

31:37

this episode was produced by Caitlyn Roberts and Lissa Anderson with help from Crystal duim it was reported by me

31:45

Sam Anderson and edited by Wendy door and Lissa Anderson it was engineered by

31:51

Marian Lozano our executive producer is Paula Schuman original music by Marian

31:57

Lozano and Pat mccusker factchecking by Anna

32:03

Alvarado special thanks to Jake Silverstein Sasha Weiss and Sam

32:09

dlck also to all the manate experts we met Wayne Hartley Martina ditt Andy

32:15

Garrett Wanda Jones and Tom Pitchford and to Craig Pitman who wrote the book

32:20

manity Insanity which was a great resource you can listen to all of our

32:27

episodes where wherever you get podcasts or visit our website at NY times.com

32:34

animal I'm Sam Anderson thanks for listening

32:40

[Music]

English (auto-generated)