

1980

Manatee: The Vanishing Floridian

Vi Stewart

Vi Stewart

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/envir_publications

Recommended Citation

Stewart, Vi and Stewart, Vi, "Manatee: The Vanishing Floridian" (1980). *Environment and Natural History Publications*. 28.

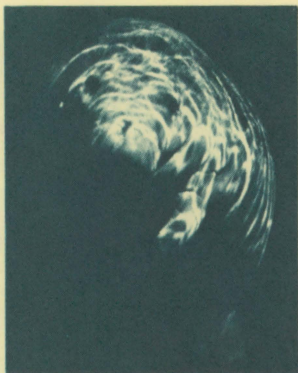
https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/envir_publications/28

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Environment and Natural History at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Environment and Natural History Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.



MANATEE

The vanishing Floridian



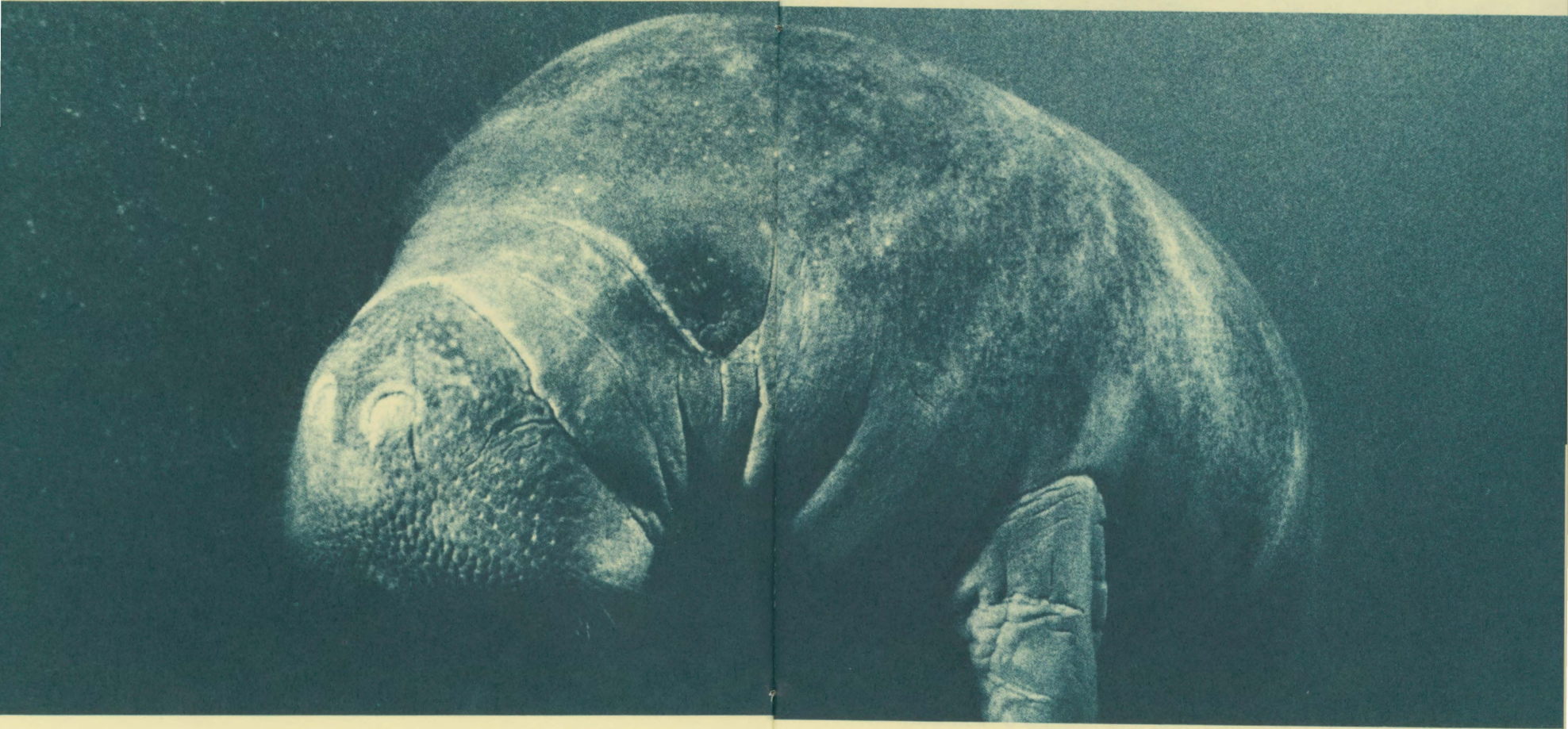
MANATEE

The vanishing Floridian

by Vi Stewart

Published by
Office of Education and Information
Florida Department of Natural Resources
Tallahassee, Florida 32301

Perhaps the most unusual sight in Florida waters is a massive grey-skinned creature called a manatee. It is a huge, torpedo-shaped mammal that has paddle-like front limbs with "finger-nails" and a tail that is flattened like a spatula. Almost buried in its greyish hide are small beady eyes with which it can barely see. Bristly hair protrudes from its lips. The upper lip is split, helping the manatee to pluck water hyacinths and other aquatic plants that are its only food.



When Christopher Columbus first saw them in the New World in 1493, he attested to the manatee's lack of beauty, noting that these "mermaids" were not quite so handsome as they had been painted. What a manatee lacks in beauty is made up for by its weight (up to 1500 pounds) and graceful movement.



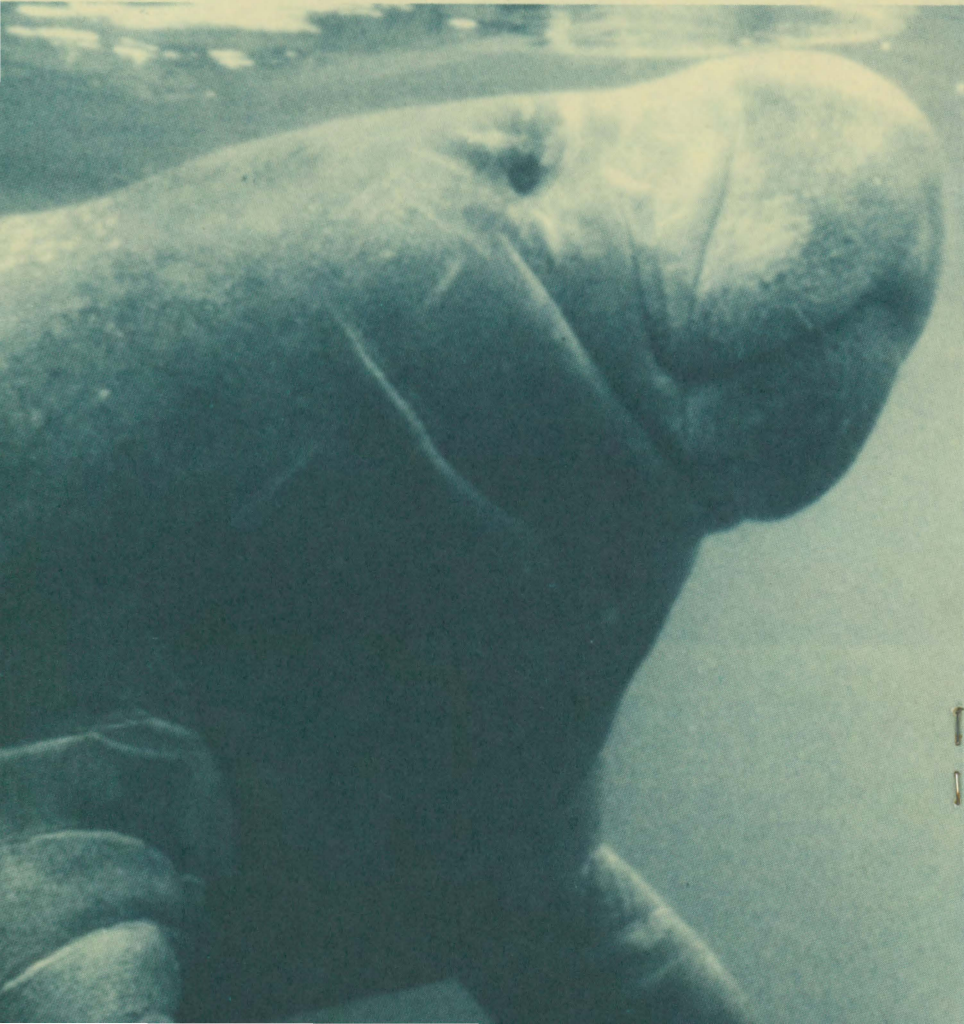
Because a manatee is such a gentle creature, lazing through Florida's rivers and coastal salt waters as it feeds on submerged vegetation, it is often called a "sea cow."

Sea cows were named Sirenia for the sirens of ancient mythology who sang to lure sailors to their death. Legend suggests that sailors of old thought they were mermaids, probably because of their habit of raising their heads out of the water.

The scientific name of Florida manatees is *Trichechus manatus*. *Trichechus*, from Latin, refers to having hairs or bristles, a characteristic of all mammals, and *manatus* is probably derived from an ancient Carib word meaning breasts. The manatee, then, is an air-breathing animal which, like other mammals, has hair, suckles its young, and has a backbone. Similar animals, called dugongs, are found in Indo-Pacific waters. Both manatees and dugongs are distantly related to elephants.

Manatees live in the rivers, estuaries, and coastal areas of tropical and sub-tropical regions of the United States, Central and South America, and the West Indies. Once there were many manatees in Florida waters, but they were recklessly hunted and have almost disappeared from the United States.

The meat of the manatee is reported to taste like veal. Its ribs were worked as ivory, and its thick hide made a tough leather. In addition, the oil extracted from manatee blubber was used for many purposes. With the arrival of civilization manatees were completely eliminated from several localities, leaving semi-isolated populations throughout their present range.



Florida Audubon Society

Floridians were quick to recognize the danger to manatee populations; as early as 1893, they passed a law to protect these gentle creatures. In 1907, the state imposed a fine of \$500 and a six-month prison term for molesting or killing a manatee. The United States Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 included sea cows and declared a moratorium on hunting them within United States territorial waters. According to the Act, mammals may be taken for display or research purposes but only after a permit is granted by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

Florida has been the site of extensive studies of the manatee. Its population distribution, behavior, and habitats were documented in part by D.S. Hartman with the cooperation of the Department of Natural Resources in the late sixties. The Florida Audubon Society and the National Fish and Wildlife Laboratory in Gainesville, Florida are currently conducting a manatee survey and further documenting the life history and biology of the species.

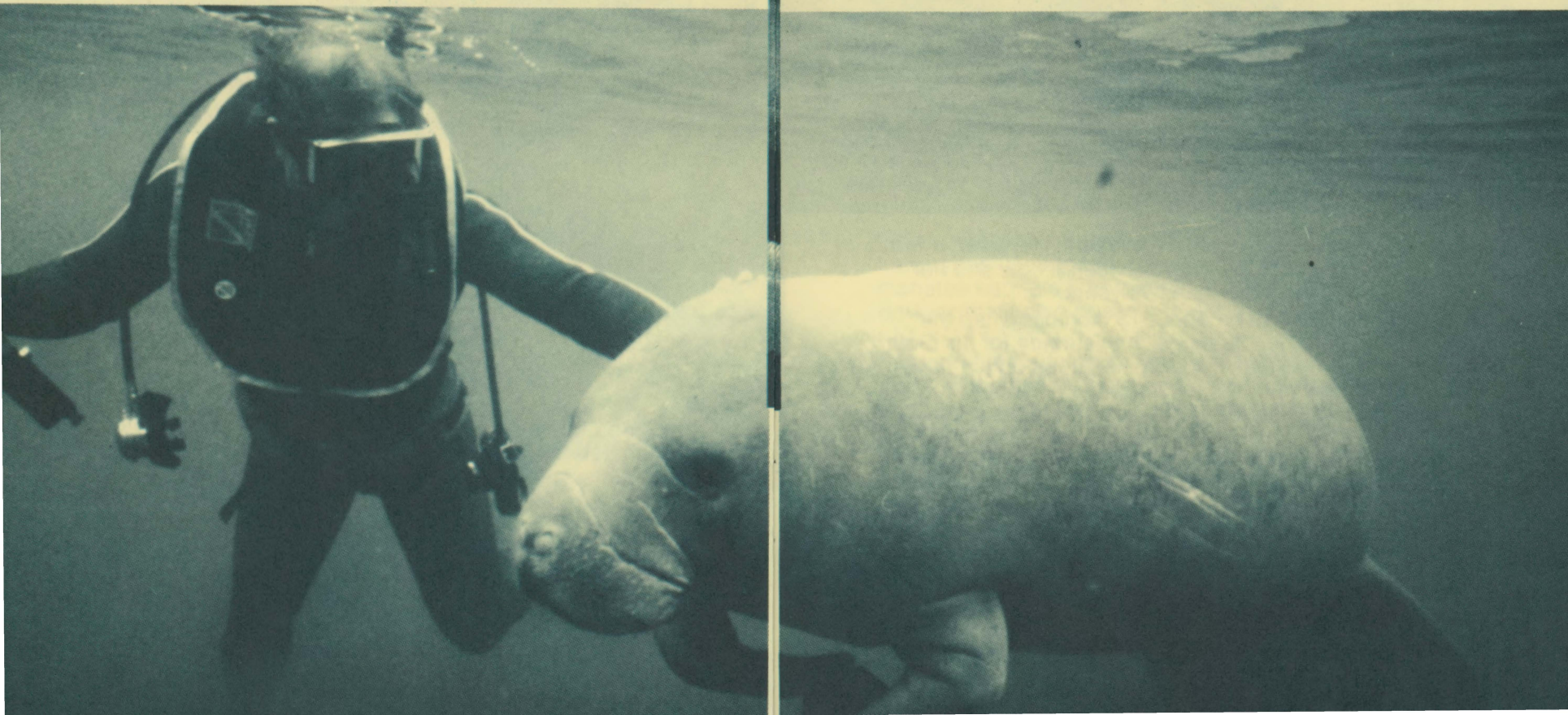
Manatees have poor eyesight, often bumping into things, but they have a keen sense of hearing. Their tiny ear openings are located just behind their eyes. Observers report that manatees actually wince at the sound of a motor boat changing gears or the whining of SCUBA regulators.

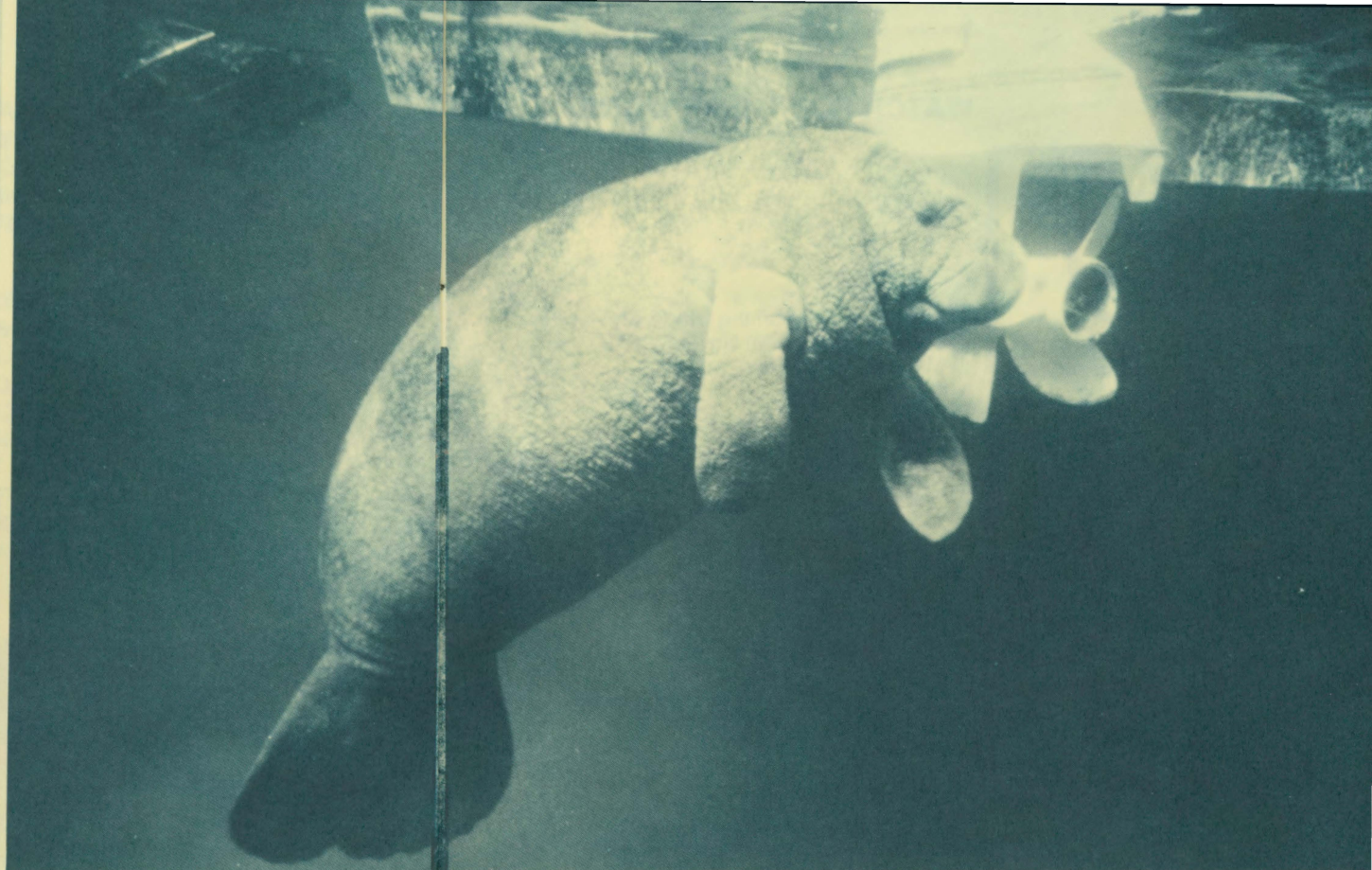
Manatee bones are very dense, and they were often worked like ivory. Manatees have only two or three functional teeth that lack enamel, are continually worn away and replaced by newly erupting teeth. A manatee's brain is relatively small, and though they can be trained to some degree, manatees are not noted for their intelligence.

As warm-blooded mammals, manatees are sensitive to sudden drops in temperature. For this reason they seek

warm, constant temperature springs when winter chills the seas. In recent years, power plant thermal discharges have become popular refuges, supplementing the limited number of natural havens available on Florida's coasts. Sea cows are susceptible to bronchial diseases, and many die of pneumonia.

When manatees surface to breathe only the tips of their snouts are visible. With each breath, they renew 50 percent of their lung air. Other mammals such as porpoises and man, do not lung air nearly as efficiently when they inhale. A sea cow will surface every minute or two when cruising and may stay underwater for more than 11 minutes when resting. However, the average time a manatee remains submerged is about four minutes. Manatees are most proficient at resting and eating. They rest ten to twelve hours a day and feed for six to eight hours.





Manatees are essentially solitary animals. However, a firm association appears to develop between a cow and her calf, often lasting for more than two years.

Gestation is believed to be about 13 months. When the calf is born, the mother "teaches" it to surface for air. Both parents help rear the calf. Though manatees do not have vocal cords, a cow and her calf keep in constant communication by a series of chirps and squeaks.

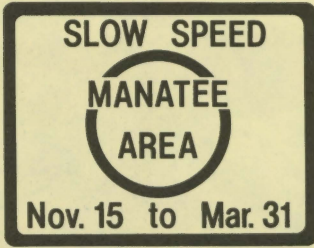
Manatees may live for more than 50 years. No natural predators prey upon manatees; their only enemies are human beings. Though vandalism and poaching have been reduced through strict law enforcement, the phenomenal increase in powerboat traffic now ranks among the leading causes of manatee deaths. Mute testimony to this unfortunate circumstance are the scars of boat propellers borne by most of these timid creatures.

Other potential dangers to their survival include the herbicides used to control water weeds. Destruction of manatee habitats and feeding grounds through shoreline development also poses a threat.

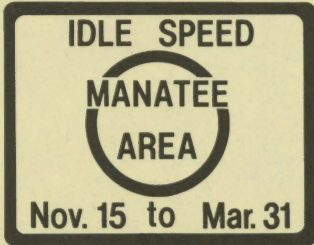
Sea cows, though protected by law, still live under the threat of extinction because of the impact of society on their environment. The future of these huge, gentle creatures is in doubt. Their survival can only be assured if those interested in environmental and ecological concerns make it their business to save the manatee.

Report any manatee deaths, harassment or injury to the **Manatee Information Center—Call TOLL FREE 1-800-342-1821** and ask for the **Florida Marine Patrol**.

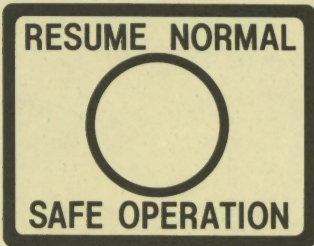
WATCH FOR THESE SIGNS.



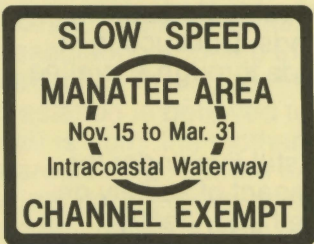
This sign appears on the **fringe of protected areas** from November 15 to March 31 each year.



This sign appears in the **center of protected areas**.



This sign appears on the **fringe of protected areas** also; you will see it as you leave the area.

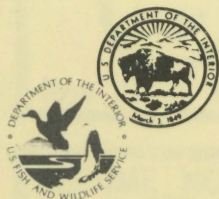


This sign appears from the St. Lucie Inlet to Jupiter Inlet.



This sign appears in the Crystal River Sanctuary.

SAVE THE MANATEE



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Division of Law Enforcement
(904) 386-8079
(305) 526-2916



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
Division of Law Enforcement
(904) 488-6559

Report any manatee deaths, harassment or injury to the
Manatee Information Center—**Call TOLL FREE**
1-800-342-1821 and ask for the Florida Marine Patrol.

This public document was promulgated with state and federal funds in the amount of \$1794.00 or \$.089 per copy to provide information on the Manatee, a Florida endangered species. (Sec. 6 Endangered Species Act of 1973-PL 93-205)
