

# Look, Don't Touch.

## Protecting Florida Manatees

Manatees (*Trichechus manatus*) are large marine mammals, currently classified as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which are being threatened by disruptive tourism practices. While the ESA has regulations regarding the capture, harassment, and hunting of this species, there are minimal other protective measures in place. Eco-tours to winter habitats, where manatees gather in large numbers, are causing undue stress to the animals and policies must be put in place to improve protection and reduce snorkeling in critical manatee habitats.

### About Manatees:

Manatees live in coastal regions and estuaries, with a current population of about 6000 individuals living in and around Florida, USA (FWC 2015). They weigh on average 1000 lbs when fully grown, feeding on marine and aquatic plants. Manatees have a very slow metabolism, and therefore require warm, shallow waters to maintain their body temperature (Irvine 1983). Water temperatures below 20°C cause a condition known as Cold Stress Syndrome (CSS) with symptoms such as emaciation, immune suppression, heart disease and can lead to death (Bossart 2003). For this reason, in the winter, manatees can be found up Florida estuaries in large groups surrounding warm water springs.



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## The Problem:

Manatees are becoming ever more popular among tourists, and the industry is growing with more companies starting up around the Crystal River, Florida providing manatee eco-tours. The Crystal River is the only manatee habitat in Florida where tourists are allowed to swim alongside the manatees, and over 100 000 tourists come each year for the experience (Allen, Sattelberger, and Keith 2014). While there are guidelines for interactions, enforcement and regulation is lacking, which is causing unjustified stress on the gentle creatures. Swimmers invade the space of the manatees, crowding around them, touching them, and impeding passage to and from the no-entry sanctuary areas. Due to the presence of swimmers, manatees are seen to avoid passing through channels in order to get to the sanctuary, which means they are spending more time in colder waters than they would if swimmers were absent (Sorice, Shafer, and Ditton 2006). Observation of manatee behaviour, where swimmers are within 3 metres, differed significantly from behaviour without swimmers. Manatees were seen to spend less time resting and nursing, and more time swimming away from snorkelers (King and Heinen 2004). Swimmers were observed to frequently violate guidelines, diving down towards manatees, chasing, touching, and surrounding them, as well as entering the sanctuaries (King and Heinen 2004). With tourists swimming alongside, and interacting with them, the manatees are unable to carry out their natural behaviours, and are expending extra energy and enduring colder temperatures than if the animals were left alone.



## The Solution:

Government agencies need to put more policies in place to regulate manatee eco-tourism in the Crystal River, Florida. No-entry sanctuary areas should be expanded to enable all manatees an area of refuge from human activities. Snorkelling must be limited, by allowing only a few swimmers at a time under close monitoring to ensure tourists are not causing stress by interacting inappropriately with manatees. There are many other options for viewing the manatees that are less disruptive, such as board walk and kayaking tours, which enable visitors to get an up close look at the animals without harming them (FKC n.d.). The government needs to take actions such as these to ensure that manatees are receiving adequate protection as the tourism industry continues to grow.



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