

## Press Release

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March 27, 2001	Ted Forsgren (850) 224-3474

### CCA FLORIDA RELEASES REVEALING SCIENTIFIC REPORT ON STATUS OF FLORIDA MANATEES

A revealing report on the status of manatees in Florida entitled "Manatees in Florida: 2001" by Dr. Thomas Fraser has been released by the Coastal Conservation Association of Florida, the state's largest recreational fishing conservation group.

"All of the biological data indicates that the West Indian manatee in Florida has sustained an increasing population for the last 25 years. The minimum count increase has been at a rate of 6-7% per year," said Dr. Fraser. "Manatees should continue to be fully protected but they have recovered to a level where they no longer appear to be an 'endangered' species."

"Instead of attacking the state's efforts with lawsuits, the manatee and animal rights groups should be congratulating the state for management efforts which have led to such a strong recovery of manatee populations," said CCA Florida Executive Director Ted Forsgren. "We support manatee protection efforts; however, these groups have manufactured an endangerment crisis that simply does not exist."

CCA Florida noted that when the lawsuits were filed one of the major manatee groups stated that "manatee deaths continue to climb - causing manatees to sink further toward extinction" and "only an estimated 2,400 (manatees) survive in the wild in Florida's coastal water." However, last January scientists counted an all time record 3,276 manatees in statewide aerial surveys; more than double the number counted 10 years ago.

Some of the major conclusions on manatee populations from Dr. Fraser's report are as follows:

All of the biological data indicates that the West Indian manatee in Florida has sustained an increasing population for the last 25 years. The minimum count increase has been at a rate of 6-7% per year. Much of the early increase occurred in the absence of widespread speed zone regulations and later (~1991-present) large-area speed zones in some counties.

A population estimate model was developed using a nonlinear (curve) equation fitted to the "minimum" aerial and other estimates for number of manatees by year for 1976 through 2001. The raw data and the model clearly show an increasing manatee population, even if it has the qualification of being "minimum population count."

Other site specific evidence supports the general observation that the manatee population is increasing. Research in the Crystal River and Blue Springs areas estimated about an 8.2-9.7% increase per year in counts for 20+ years of records. Tampa Bay, even though it has lost more than 80% of its seagrasses, has also seen a large increase in manatees.

Increases in the manatee population should be expected to show increasing numbers of dead manatees from all causes including boats over time.

Mortality data is consistent with an increasing population of manatees. If the natural mortality rate has remained relatively unchanged over the past several decades, then relative change should reflect trends in the general population.

An examination of per capita manatee deaths more accurately determines relative mortality trend issues than simply just the use of annual numerical totals. Analysis shows that while the annual deaths are increasing, the annual deaths per 100 manatees are not trending up. Additionally, annual perinatal deaths (natural deaths at or near birth) are increasing over time, but the annual deaths per 100 manatees are not trending up.

Last year, environmental and animal rights groups sued both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to force them to increase protection for manatees, including creating more sanctuaries and refuges. In the federal lawsuit settlement agreement, the USFWS agreed to have new sanctuaries in place no later than September 28, 2001. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is currently considering a proposed settlement agreement.

CCA stated that some of the coastal areas identified in settlement agreement for "no entry or limited entry" zones are prime saltwater recreational fishing areas which have never had a boat related mortality in the 30 years that governmental agencies have been tracking manatee mortalities.

"Our concern was that the manatee debate was being driven more by emotion than by science, particularly the narrow focus on just the annual 'body count' of animals killed by boats," said Forsgren. CCA Florida asked Dr. Fraser to analyze all the mortality and other biological information in the context of the total manatee population.

Dr. Fraser's analysis regarding the impact of boating related deaths on the manatee population includes the following:

The rate of boating deaths is not changing faster than the number of boat registrations with respect to the population. The manatee population is growing much faster than the number of boating deaths. When boat-related mortality is adjusted per 100 manatees there is no apparent change with time.

The manatee boating deaths per capita analysis shows a variable, but stable rate, without an increasing trend. Increases in the population have a significant effect on the annual number of deaths. Unfortunately, Florida should expect the increasing annual numeric trend to some extent. This is not a sign of failure to adequately protect manatees, but a positive indication of successful population growth as long as there is no sign of increasing per capita mortality rate. The perceived failure (measured only by total body count) is a repeating loop for more regulation that must be restructured.

"Florida should develop its own manatee population models before adding more restrictions based solely on rising boat related deaths and use instead a per capita evaluation," said Fraser. CCA Florida is urging the FWC to conduct a public workshop on their proposed settlement agreement with the manatee groups and to re-examine the process for determining need for proposed manatee speed zones and closed areas.

Lastly, Dr. Fraser made the following statement about the status of manatees as an endangered species:

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has a process (Florida Administrative Code, 68A-27) which lays out the requirements for listing, downlisting or delisting a species along with the biological characteristics for each category: endangered, threatened, and species of special concern. Based on examination of these State criteria, manatees appear to exceed the conditions necessary for reclassification to a species of special concern, or perhaps, to be listed as recovered. Similar action on the federal level is appropriate. Reasons for such consideration include a increasing population for more than 20 years, full occupation of its habitat without significant restriction on forage, water, or reproductive areas, and virtually no real probability of the manatee becoming extinct in the next 100 years due to boat interactions.

CCA Florida indicated that Dr. Fraser will present his report and findings to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at the FWC's proposed Brevard County manatee rules public hearing on March 30, 2001 in Tallahassee.

NOTE: Thomas Fraser is a partner in an environmental and marine consulting firm. He has an M.S. and Ph.D. in Marine Biology and is the author or co-author on 40 peer reviewed scientific papers. He was appointed by Governor's Graham and Martinez to serve on the Florida Marine Fisheries Commission from 1986 through 1993. Dr. Fraser served as chairman of the commission for 4 years.