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COMMENTARY

Good news-bad news on Florida manatee deaths this year

Loss of seagrass to pollution-fed algae blooms continues taking a toll

| CRAIG PITTMAN

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📷 Manatees feeding on lettuce near Cape Canaveral. Credit: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

My dad, an inveterate jokester, was a big fan of “good news-bad news” gags.

One of his favorites was about two old codgers named Bill and Joe who were big baseball fans. As Bill lies on his deathbed, Joe makes him promise to find a way to tell him if there’s baseball in heaven. Sure enough, one night not long after Bill dies, Joe hears his friend’s voice floating down to him from above.

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” deceased Bill says, “The good news is that there IS baseball in heaven.”

“Great!” Joe says. “What’s the bad news?”

“You’re pitching Friday.”

I thought of my dad’s old joke last week when state officials held their final press conference of the year to talk about the starving manatees they’ve been feeding lettuce to get them through the cold months. The feeding had ended for a second year.

The day they held the press conference, by the way, was “[Manatee Appreciation Day](#),” which was rather ironic. If you’ve lived here a while, you’ve probably noticed that every day in Florida is Irony Appreciation Day.

The good news, the state folks said, was this: Fewer manatees died this winter.

That’s a relief, because over the past two years we’ve lost 2,000 of them. Many died of starvation caused by algae blooms that killed off the seagrass they usually eat.

In 2021, [1,100 manatees died](#), shattering all previous records. Another [800 died last year](#), which is still pretty high.

So far this year, scientists have spotted only 215 dead manatees. In the first three months of last year, the number of dead manatees hit 463. The year before that – the one that broke the record – the scientists by this point had already collected 559 carcasses.

“We’re well below what we experienced the past two winters,” Andy Garrett, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s manatee rescue coordinator, told reporters last week.

But before we start unfurling the victory banners, holding a parade, and singing manatee songs (“[Barbara Manatee](#)” from “Veggie Tales” is my go-to sea cow carol), wait till you hear who’s pitching Friday.

In other words, here’s the bad news: Part of the reason the death toll is down this spring is because there are now far fewer manatees than there used to be.



📷 Patrick Rose. Credit: Save the Manatee Club

“The population is still really precarious,” [Patrick Rose](#), longtime executive director of the Save the Manatee Club, told me this week.

Just five years ago, [biologists counted about 6,000 manatees](#) swimming around our waterways. The [official U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimate](#) of the population prior to the die-off was 6,300. Some estimates said we hit 7,000.

I’m no math whiz. When the numbers go higher than 10, I have to take off my shoes. But even I can see that we’ve lost about a quarter to a third of all manatees.

That’s sure to put a crimp in their future.

‘Endangered’ no more?

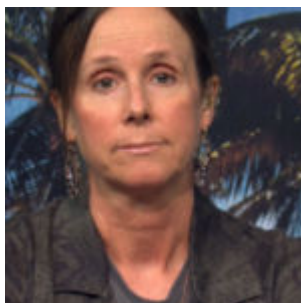
Here’s the really scary news. It involves the little manatees, which – as with land cows – are known as “calves.”

Manatee calves look like regular manatees, only smaller. If you’re a fan of the TV show “The Mandalorian,” they give off [the same ugly-cute vibe as Grogu](#), who’s basically Yoda Jr.

Even under normal circumstance, there aren’t a lot of calves. Female manatees generally give birth to a single calf every two to five years. That calf will then stay close to its mother for one to two years to learn travel routes for the winter, the location of food, places for warm water refuges, that kind of thing.

Some calves don’t live long enough to grow into a sofa-sized adult aquatic mammal. Often, it’s because Mama Manatee was killed by a careless boater or some other cause.

Normally the number of calves killed in a year is around 4 to 8 percent of the total number of deaths, Rose said. But right now, “the raw numbers are showing it’s less than 1 percent.”



Martine de Wit is the veterinarian in charge of the state's Marine Mammal Pathology Laboratory in St. Petersburg. That's where she and other experts examine the carcass of dead manatees for clues on what killed them. She spelled out the calves' problem last week:

"We can assume less manatees were born if we see less dead ones," de Wit said.

And she said we won't know for sure the impact this die-off has had on the manatees' reproduction rate for several years. Malnourished and starving animals generally lack the energy to produce any young.

That's means it's liable to take a looooong time to rebuild the manatee population to the size it was in 2017.

That's the year that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials announced they were so confident about manatees' future they were taking them off the "endangered" list and calling them merely "threatened."

They did that [the day after Manatee Appreciation Day](#). Ironic, don't you think?

'Be a real manatee'

Throughout the die-off, there were people arguing that this massive manatee massacre (try saying that three times real fast) was all the fault of the manatees.

And, they said, the way to fix it was to kill even MORE manatees.

One person making that argument was a Brevard County commissioner. Brevard is where Cape Canaveral is located, so you'd figure it contains more than the usual share of rocket scientists. But perhaps not.

Last year, toward the end of an otherwise dull Brevard County Commission meeting, a commissioner and [Jet Ski fan](#) named Curt Smith decided the time was right to demonstrate that he is definitely NOT employed by NASA.

"I think the elephant in the room for seagrass is the sea cow, which is called the manatee," Smith told his fellow commissioners, according to [Florida Today](#). "Nobody's addressing the fact that we have too many manatees, eating such a small amount of seagrass."

To fix the problem, Smith contended we should shoot some manatees.

After all, he said, when the state's bear population caused a few problems, the wildlife commission allowed hunters to kill about 300 of them. (Note that that this bear hunt, [the first in 21 years](#), happened in 2015 and it was such a public relations disaster that [it has yet to be repeated](#).)

So why, Smith asked, couldn't the state do the same for the manatees — just to help them out?

“You know and I know that would be very difficult with manatees, because everybody loves the manatees,” Smith said. “If you kill a manatee, my God, the world would come to an end. But I think something has to be considered along those lines.”

Then he made his strangest comment of all: “How about if helping them is teaching them to be a real manatee and migrate. We’re not treating them like wild animals, we’re managing them like pets.”

In other words: You manatees don’t belong here in Florida anymore. Time for you to swim on up to Georgia or the Carolinas. Maybe they’ll be willing to put up with your habit of getting in the way of speedy Jet Skis.

I am happy to report that Smith is no longer a commissioner. And if he ever decides to run for some other office, I hope his “let’s kill some manatees” comments come back to bite him as hard as [a hungry gator chomping down on a big python](#).

Manatee salad bar

The fact is, the manatees aren’t responsible for their starvation. If you want to see who to blame, look in the mirror. As Walt Kelly’s cartoon possum [Pogo](#) once observed, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

We humans have produced a tremendous amount of pollution over the past 20 or so years. We did it by over-fertilizing our lawns, [using septic tanks](#) so old they leak, and not expanding old sewer plants [so over-burdened they spilled during a hard rain](#).

All that waste winds up in our waterways, where it fuels our increasingly frequent toxic algae blooms. One in the normally [fertile Indian River Lagoon](#), which stretches for 156 miles along the state’s Atlantic Coast, killed tens of thousands of acres of [seagrass](#). The lagoon lost about 75 percent of its seagrass beds.



📷 A manatee mother and calf. Credit: Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute

Seagrass is what manatees eat. They are to seagrass beds as a group of Florida seniors is to [the buffet at Golden Corral](#).

Imagine walking into your favorite restaurant and the waiter telling you, “Our special tonight is nothing. We’ve also got no appetizers, no sides, and no desserts. Whenever you’re ready I can take your order, which should be an empty plate.” That’s what we’ve done to the manatees.

To replace the missing seagrass, the state spent about \$250,000 this year buying 3,000 pounds of romaine lettuce a week from a [grower down in Belle Glade](#). Then scientists spent days and days tossing it into a floating plastic square near Cape Canaveral. That way the manatees could eat it and not (we hope) directly associate food with people.

Most of the cost of the lettuce-feeding, first tried in 2022, was covered by donations from folks around the country who apparently care more about the survival of our official state marine mammal than a certain former Brevard commissioner.

Lettuce all be thankful that there are such generous folks in this world. (Note to editor: Please insert “rimshot” here.)

But I worry that the longer this special manatee feeding program has to continue, the fewer people will care enough to donate. It’s the emergency motivating them right now but, if we go into a third year, would it still count as an emergency?

So, here’s some more good news: A little bit of the seagrass in the Indian River Lagoon [came back](#). Manatees ate some this winter but left some too. Scientists hope the seagrass might rebound a little at a time.

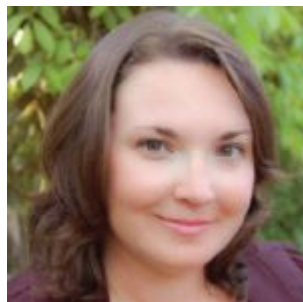
But before you start unfurling the victory banners, etc., I’ve got some more bad news too. It’s about the seagrass in Southwest Florida.

Too deep to see the light

Tampa Bay used to be a widely hailed success story for restoring seagrass. By 2016, the people working toward bringing it back had achieved their long-sought goal of 38,000 acres, a size not seen since the ’50s.

But as Inspector Clouseau said after he destroyed a priceless Steinway: “[Not anymore.](#)”

Between 2016 and 2022, Tampa Bay [lost more than 11,000 acres of seagrass](#), a decline of more than 25 percent.



📷 Maya Burke. Credit: Tampa Bay Estuary Program

In some spots, “the turtle grass is just rotting at the base,” said [Maya Burke](#), assistant director of the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, a nonprofit devoted to building a healthy bay.

As with the Indian River Lagoon, the cause is human pollution – stormwater runoff carrying massive loads of it, floods that overwhelm sewer plants, and so forth.

Burke said the pollution is fueling the growth of a macroalgae, [Caulerpa prolifera](#), instead of beneficial seagrass. In some places on the bay bottom where seagrass used to grow, there’s “mucky sediment and an algae bloom.”

Rising sea levels caused by climate change are hurting efforts to bring the seagrasses back, she said. Seagrass needs sunlight to pierce the water so it can grow. Unfortunately, “the bay is 6 inches deeper, at least. It’s too great a distance for light to reach the bottom.”

Something similar has happened in Sarasota Bay, too, according to [Dave Tomasko](#), executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.



📷 Dave Tomasko. Credit: Sarasota Bay Estuary Program

“We’ve lost a lot of seagrass that was growing deeper than 6 feet,” he said. “We had 15 years of success and it all went away in five years.”

The Southwest Florida coast is also where the manatees are dying now. They’re not starving on this side of the state. Instead, they’re being killed by the toxins from a [persistent red tide algae bloom](#). Those are the toxins that can also make it hard for us humans to breathe.

Our fine Legislature has repeatedly backed away from doing anything about these pollution problems. They fear offending their campaign contributors who are producing this noxious waste.

Just this week, for instance, [FloridaPolitics.com](#) reported that a Senate committee on the environment (hey, it’s Irony Appreciation Day again!) stripped out of [Senate Bill 1538](#) any requirement that owners of septic tanks have their systems inspected for leaks every five years.

Like the bottom of Tampa Bay, the senators are in too deep to see the light.

A statue for Snooty

As a Florida native, I do like manatees. They're a reminder that Florida – so often held up for ridicule as [the Punchline State](#) – is responsible for some cool things too, like [Tom Petty](#) and an [award-winning state park system](#).

I like seeing manatees in the wild. When my kids were little, I once scored major Dad Points by taking them to Apollo Beach in the winter to see about 300 manatees gathered near the warm-water [outfall of the Tampa Electric plant](#). I even went [snorkeling with the manatees](#) in Crystal River, although my flailing – er, excuse me, “swimming style” – scared most of them away.

A few years ago I wrote [a long obituary](#) about our most famous manatee, Snooty. When some people suggested replacing Manatee County's Confederate monument with a statue of Snooty, I [wholeheartedly supported that](#).

These days, the folks in Tallahassee are all about [protecting statues](#). They seem less concerned with protecting us Floridians or the things that make our state special. They need a reminder that their lenience toward polluters is killing off our manatees and our seagrass, and we don't like that.

Maybe we should finally build that statue of Snooty. Instead of Bradenton, though, we should build it in Tallahassee – and position it so it's facing the state Capitol, so that every legislator has to look at it.



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Craig Pittman is a native Floridian. In 30 years at the Tampa Bay Times, he won numerous state and national awards for his environmental reporting. He is the author of six books. In 2020 the Florida Heritage Book Festival named him a Florida Literary Legend. Craig is co-host of the "Welcome to Florida" podcast. He lives in St. Petersburg with his wife and children.

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