

Signs of hope for endangered sawfish

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Approaching Port Everglades in a helicopter, Ryan Goldman peered down at the water and saw a ray swimming at unusually high speed.

Behind it, he spotted two large and bizarre-looking predators: the endangered smalltooth sawfish, which use their long, serrated bills to hunt prey. The two 12-foot-long fish swam out of the inlet as the helicopter circled and Goldman, a biologist for Broward County who was in the air to count manatees, took photos.

The sighting in March may provide further evidence of a modest resurgence of one of the world's most endangered fish, a giant that that can reach a length of 18 feet. Although they resemble sharks, sawfish are a species of ray. They use the saw, known as a rostrum, to slash at schools of fish and dislodge prey from the ocean floor.

Once ranging across the coast from North Carolina to Texas, the smalltooth sawfish has been reduced to a core habitat along the coast of Everglades National Park, the Florida Keys and southwestern Florida. Although the species can be found along the coasts of other countries, the U.S. population is believed to be isolated.

"They are the largest species of in-shore fish that anybody's going to see," said George Burgess, director of the International Shark Attack File, who is compiling a database of global sawfish sightings. "It's bigger than any of the sharks, bigger than any of the groupers. ... Its recovery as a species in the United States is totally dependent on what we do in Florida. We as Floridians have a special obligation to save the species."

In the past few years, sawfish have been turning up more frequently in parts of their old range. Divers have encountered them in submerged wrecks off Jupiter. One turned up in Port Everglades in 2012, although it was dead and tangled in a fishing line.

"We're seeing signs that the population may be recovering slowly," said Dean Grubbs, associate director of research at the Florida State University Coastal & Marine Laboratory, who has placed satellite tags on the sawfish. "We are seeing some animals showing up in the Florida Panhandle, Alabama, the east coast of Georgia. We would expect, if the population continues to recover, for them to show up in Louisiana, South Carolina and North Carolina."

On a recent spearfishing dive north of Jupiter Inlet, Jim Fyfe saw two sawfish, one about 12 feet long, the other 14 feet. A video posted on YouTube shows each sawfish resting on the sandy ocean floor in about 75 feet of water. When Fyfe approached, they stirred and swam off.

In addition to spreading out to new areas, Burgess said, "we do have hints that there are more of them" in their core range.

But Gregg Poulakis, a biologist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, said he isn't sure a recovery is underway.

"I think it's a little too early to tell," said Poulakis, who has done years of field research on sawfish. "There's no analysis I'm aware of that shows the population is increasing. They're stable for sure."

The decline of sawfish was largely because the fish were accidentally caught in commercial fishing gear, such as longlines and shrimp trawls. They also have been caught by recreational fishermen who cut off the rostrum as a trophy. Another cause of decline has been coastal construction, which destroyed the red mangrove coastlines that sheltered

juvenile sawfish.

But several protection measures have gone into effect, both before and after the sawfish was designated an [endangered species](#) in 2003.

In 1994 Florida banned the use of gillnets, large commercial fishing nets that hang vertically in the water. Sawfish habitat around the Keys and Everglades National Park received additional protections. And a public awareness campaign reminded recreational anglers it was illegal to kill sawfish and they should avoid harming any accidentally caught.

"People used to catch them, cut off the saw and throw the fish overboard," Grubbs said. "People probably still do that, but for the most part that has ended."

Countering this positive trend has been the rise of social media, which has led many to post photos and videos of themselves on YouTube, Instagram and other sites catching sharks, sawfish and other marine creatures, said Sonja Fordham, president of Shark Advocates International. To get better photos, they often haul them out of the water, an illegal act when it involves endangered species, which are protected by law from harassment.

"Through social media we're seeing more mishandling of sawfish," Fordham said. "Sawfish with tail ropes that had clearly been dragged. Sawfish should never be lifted out of the water or dragged."

Unfortunately, she said, funding for public outreach on sawfish has been reduced, making it harder to spread the word on how to avoid harming them.

Poulakis said he still encounters sawfish with fishing line around their heads, often tight and biting into their flesh because the sawfish has

grown. He said recreational anglers generally try to free the fish but understandably don't want to get too close to a thrashing saw.

"Most of them try to untangle them as best they can," Poulakis said. "We see pretty significant damage to the head area. It gets wrapped around. It really starts to dig in. We've seen cases where as the fish grows, it will get tighter. We cut that off."

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