

Manatee season ends with fewer deaths from boats

April 6 2015, by David Fleshler, Sun Sentinel

Manatees and boats dodged each other fairly effectively in South Florida this season, with a total of three of the endangered marine mammals killed by watercraft in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.

Manatee season officially ended Wednesday, when slow-speed zones for boats expired. They take effect again Nov. 15. With the warmer weather, the big marine mammals have begun streaming north to the more abundant seagrass beds of central and northern Florida and southern Georgia.

Last season saw two killed in Broward, three in Miami-Dade and none in Palm Beach, the prior season saw two killed in Broward, one in Miami-Dade and two in Palm Beach, and the season before that saw three killed in Broward, none in Miami-Dade and one in Palm Beach.

This season, each county saw a single manatee death from watercraft.

"Considering that for a few months we had hundreds and hundreds of manatees in the county, one watercraft mortality seems to be pretty good," said Pat Quinn, Broward County's manatee coordinator. "It indicates boaters are really obeying the speed zones."

Alessandra Medri, the Palm Beach County manatee coordinator, said her county's single death was less than ideal, even though it could have been worse.

"I think we did pretty good," she said. "I wish it was zero. Last year we had zero, so even one is not what I wanted."

The mild winter in the Southeast contributed to the relatively low death count, with more of the cold-sensitive mammals remaining in southern Georgia and North Florida rather than heading south for the warmth of South Florida's waters.

This season also saw the start of construction of a manatee viewing center by the Florida Power & Light plant in Riviera Beach. The viewing center, which will be free, will be South Florida's first public spot for watching manatees. Dozens, and sometimes, hundreds, gather near the plant during the winter for the warmth of the water it discharges. FPL spokesman Richard Gibbs said the viewing center is expected to open in early 2016, during the second half of the next manatee season.

Statewide, the season has proceeded without any of the disastrous mass die-offs that have struck manatees in previous years. There were no serious cold snaps, and the mysterious mass deaths around the Indian River Lagoon, which claimed the lives of 146 manatees in 2012 and 2013, appear to have stopped.

"We haven't had any major cold or red tides," said Martina DeWit, a veterinarian with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's manatee program. "It was an average year."

A record number of manatees were counted this [season](#) - 6,063 statewide - topping the previous record by nearly 1,000. DeWit said this does not indicate a sudden increase in the manatee population, but rather that water conditions were ideal for seeing them.

The high count may be taken into account by federal wildlife officials as they consider a petition from the Pacific Legal Foundation to reclassify

the [manatee](#) from endangered to threatened. The petition was submitted on behalf of Save Crystal River, a group of property owners concerned about boating restrictions in King's Bay in Citrus County.

Chuck Underwood, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said Friday that a decision is expected some time this year.

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