

Florida manatee deaths surge past 400 in first two months of 2021

March 9 2021, by Richard Tribou



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Florida manatees are dying at an alarming rate in the first two months of 2021, more than tripling the normal amount of fatalities seen during the same period over the last five years.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has posted in its preliminary [manatee](#) mortality statistics that from Jan. 1-Feb. 26, the state has recorded 403 manatee deaths, the majority of which have not had a necropsy to determine cause of [death](#). Brevard County by far leads the way with 186 of those deaths.

The five-year average for the same time period is 129 manatee deaths.

The FWC said it was investigating the high mortality in the central and south Atlantic coastal regions of Florida. Most of the deaths are occurring in the Indian River Lagoon.

"Environmental conditions in portions of the Indian River Lagoon remain a concern," the FWC posted on its manatee program site.

"Preliminary information indicates that a reduction in food availability is a contributing factor. We will continue with a comprehensive investigation and share information as it becomes available. The FWC has always done a rigorous and thorough job at investigating threats to manatees."

According to the St. Johns River Water Management District, a reduction in seagrass in the [lagoon](#) could be the primary cause. The district cites that since 2009, 58% of the seagrass has disappeared, mostly because of an increase in nutrients in the water that come from runoff into the lagoon.

"The decline didn't happen overnight. The stunning water views, the fishing and recreational opportunities that drew people to the area have resulted in the water quality conditions we see today," reads a statement from the district's executive director Ann Shortelle. "Too many nutrients, specifically nitrogen and phosphorus, are entering the lagoon from overfertilized lawns, faulty sewage treatment and leaching from septic tanks."

Florida's manatee population gathers in warm-water regions such as the lagoon during the winter months, so FWC states that as the temperatures climb, and manatees migrate naturally away from Brevard and around the state, that their situation may improve.

"This dispersal should lead manatees to better habitats," FWC stated.

The state recorded 637 deaths across all 12 months of 2020, according to preliminary FWC data. That's a little higher than the five-year average of 578. More than 100 of the 2020 deaths, though, including 40 in Brevard,, came in December as well, feeding into the continued mortality seen in January and February. FWC recorded only 405 manatee deaths for the entire year in 2015.

Despite the deaths, FWC estimates the manatee population in the state to be around 7,000, which is much higher than its low 30 years ago.

In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's estimated population low of 1,267 manatees in 1991 has improved to the point that the manatee's status was changed in 2017 from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

FWC is continuing its manatee rescue program, though. If you see an injured or dead manatee, you can call the FWC's Wildlife Alert number at 1-888-404-3922 or #FWC on a cellphone.

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