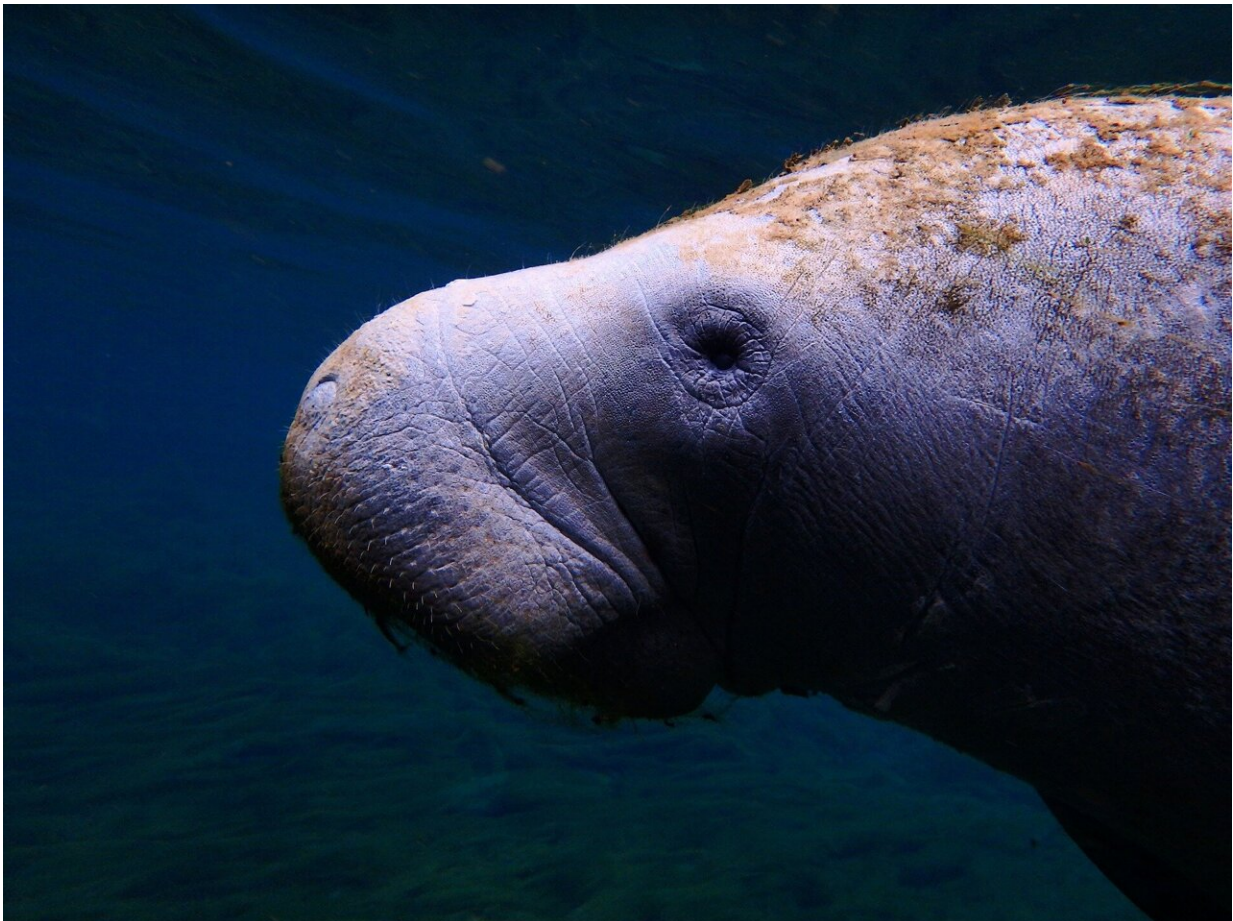


Want to help Florida's manatees? Don't feed them yourself

December 13 2021, by Zachary T. Sampson



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Wildlife officials have announced an effort this winter to attempt to feed

Florida manatees greens like romaine lettuce in the northern Indian River Lagoon to keep them from starving.

Understandably, many Floridians are asking how they can help. One thing is clear: They should not feed manatees themselves.

"We'd rather as many manatees as possible stay on their normal diets," said Pat Rose, executive director of the Save the Manatee Club.

Feeding manatees could be a form of harassment, which is illegal under both state and federal law, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Hand-feeding [wild animals](#) can cause them to become conditioned to human beings and encourage them depart from natural behavior.

Well-meaning people could unintentionally give manatees something that will make the beloved animals sick, Rose said. People have used greens to get close to manatees for malicious reasons before, he said.

"We've literally had in the past people put vegetation on fishing hooks," he said, then fight a [manatee](#) like a sport fish.

The officially sanctioned feeding program will take place under close monitoring in a portion of the northern Indian River Lagoon, where manatees spend winter months near warm discharges from a power plant. Algal blooms, fueled by human pollution, have killed huge swaths of seagrasses in the region, leaving manatees without enough food.

The Conservation Commission says the vegetation being used "has been carefully selected in consultation with manatee nutrition experts."

While people may want to donate food, the state says [wildlife officials](#) won't be accepting any. They are looking to [local farms](#), grocery stores

and major food distributors. Officials believe they will be able to find enough.

The starvation crisis, Rose noted, is confined to a small part of the Florida coast. Around Tampa Bay, manatees usually have no trouble finding food.

So how can you help?

Rose recommended making donations to the Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership, which includes his group, or volunteering in the future to help plant seagrasses. Feeding manatees is at best a short-term bandage for broader ecosystem troubles that will take years to reverse. The state says people can also buy special manatee license plates; the money is supposed to help rescue efforts and research.

You can learn more about the response to the manatee die-off, and what to do, via the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's website.

Tips for viewing manatees safely

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission instructs [people](#) to not touch, chase or, yes, feed manatees. You could be harassing them—and breaking the law. If you encounter manatees in the wild, give them space. Do not make a lot of noise or splash if one surfaces near you; doing so can scare them.

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