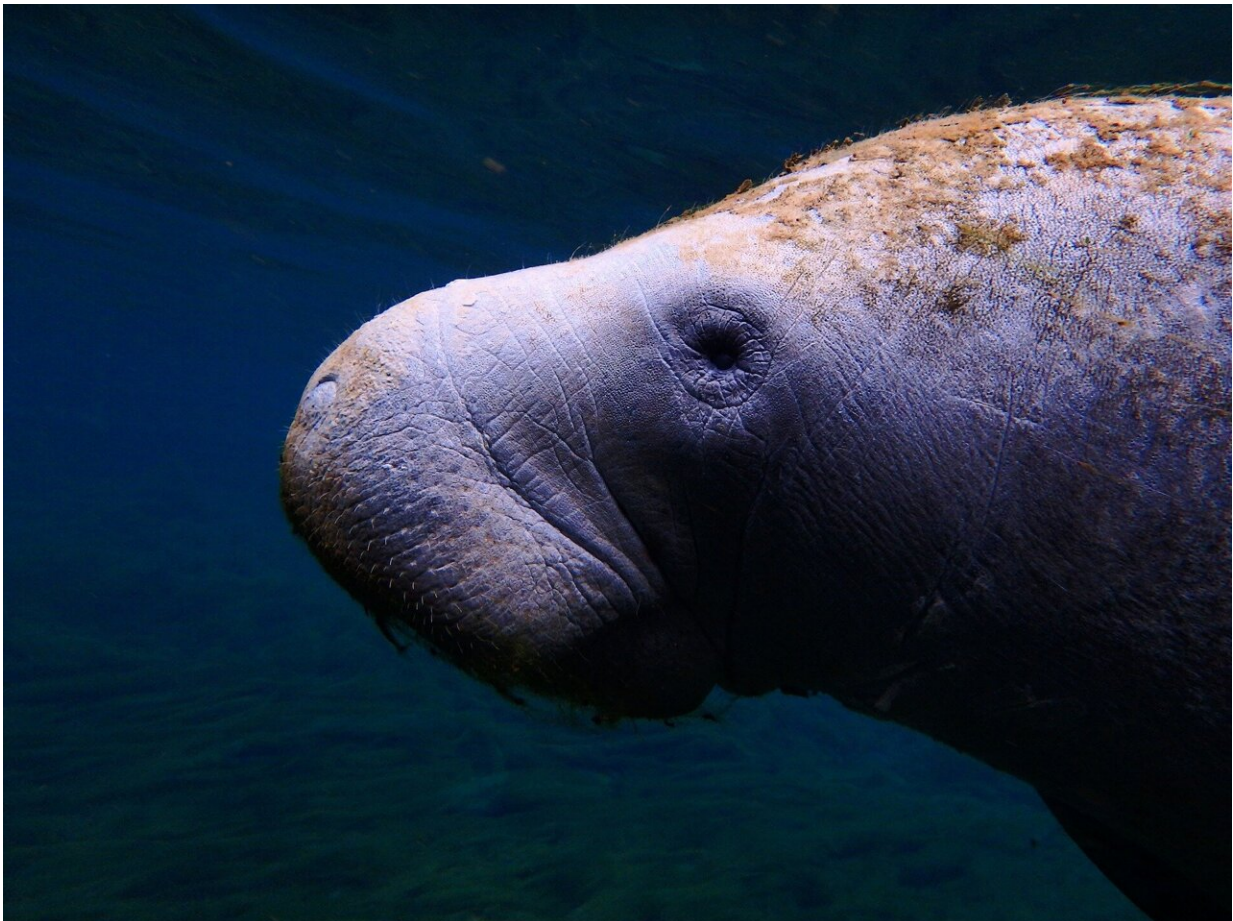


A record 1,101 Florida manatees died in 2021. When will it end?

January 11 2022, by Margo Snipe



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

TAMPA, Fla.—It's been clear for months that 2021 would be the

deadliest year on record for Florida's manatees. When the death count surpassed 1,000 in November, experts sounded the alarm, fearing the toll the winter months ahead would continue to inflict.

The final death count is in—and it's grim. The Sunshine State recorded 1,101 manatees deaths last year, officially the worst year on record.

Last year's fatalities are nearly double the death toll in 2020, which totaled 637 manatees lost, according to Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission data. It's by far the most deaths since 830 manatees died in 2013.

"I've been studying manatees for around 50 years, and I am totally shocked and flabbergasted by this number," said James "Buddy" Powell, president of the Clearwater Marine Aquarium and executive director of its research institute.

When he first started studying manatees in the 1960s, the team estimated there were 1,000 living manatees statewide. Now, last year's death toll surpasses that.

"It's really disturbing and really sad," said Cynthia Stringfield, a veterinarian at ZooTampa.

She said the zoo's David A. Straz, Jr. Manatee Critical Care Center has been working hard to keep up with the increase in the number of sick manatees coming in, and they're seeing more calves than usual.

The vast majority of deaths occurred at the start of 2021, during winter, when water temperatures dropped. This year's forecast mild winter leaves scientists optimistic that this winter's [death toll](#) may not be as severe.

"Normally during the winter we see cold stress cases," Stringfield said. "We haven't seen as many of those so far this year."

Still, scientists and advocates are concerned that manatee deaths will continue to pile up.

"The big unknown is how cold is it going to get this winter and how long is it going to last?" said Patrick Rose, executive director of Save the Manatees. And there's another problem: "There's next to no food for them."

Most deaths are being recorded on Florida's east coast, in the northern Indian River Lagoon, where manatees cluster in the colder months to find food and stay warm in the heat generated by a nearby power plant.

But the lagoon's seagrass—the vegetarian mammal's main food source—has been depleted over the years due to algal blooms, which are caused by pollution from leaky septic tanks, sewer systems and fertilizer runoff.

The ecosystem has been devastated, scientists say, forcing the state's iconic mammal into starvation.

In December, wildlife officials announced an effort to feed Florida manatees greens like romaine lettuce to keep them from starving. Experts warn that individuals should not attempt to feed the manatees themselves as it could cause them to become conditioned to human beings and lead them astray from their natural behavior.

It could also be a form of harassment, which is illegal under state and federal law, according to the state wildlife commission.

Physical injury is another major cause of death. More than 100 manatees

died due to watercraft injury in 2021, according to the latest state data. Experts warn that deaths caused by boats are likely undercounted because the vast majority of manatees are not necropsied. The totals for causes of death for all manatees last year are still being compiled.

In years prior, a large portion of [manatee](#) deaths were driven by injury, which in some ways was controllable through speed zones and sanctuaries, said Powell with the aquarium. More recently, as a significant portion starve to [death](#), effective solutions are much more difficult to find.

Red Tide, which hit Tampa Bay and the Pinellas coastline hard last summer, is also a contributing factor.

As the crisis continues, the public can help the manatees by donating to local organizations dedicated to saving the animals and by being mindful about their own behaviors, such as safely sharing the waterways when boating, obeying the marine speed limit and staying in deeper water channels.

They could also reduce their the use of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals that run off into the waterways and hurt seagrass.

"Little things matter," said Stringfield. "It all adds up."

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