

Gentle giants

by Gregory Sweeney

It's a wintry, bone-chilling day just before dawn; our warm breath is as thick as the early morning fog on the cold air. We quietly slip into our wetsuits, don our masks and fins. Just then two large snouts appear from beneath the water surface and quickly disappear. Cautiously we abandon our small rental boat and enter the water with camera in hand.

Below the surface, we are surrounded by gigantic creatures as big as 3 meters (10 ft.) and weighing 454 to 1,600 kg (about 1,000 to 3,500 lbs). Cautious curiosity brings these giants close to us. I slowly reach out my hand, touching their thick, rough skin noticing the flat paddle-shaped tail and small black eyes. Is this the famous legends told by sailors reporting seeing half-fish and half woman resting on rocks and cruising the river ways?

In reality those sailors probably saw manatees. Manatees are forever linked to the Greek myth of women who lure sailors by using the name Sirenian in the Latin name for one of the species.



A playful manatee comes in to greet us with a characteristically slow pass.

The West Indian manatee has two subspecies; the Florida manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*) and the Antillean manatee which can be found throughout the Caribbean. There are two other manatee species: one along the west coast of Africa and another in the Amazon. There is also a close relative called the dugong. It is found in the Indian and Pacific oceans. The Amazonian manatee can only live in freshwater lakes and rivers, has no fingernails and its belly

has white and pink patches. The West Indian and African manatee have three or four fingernails on each flipper. They can live in fresh or salt water. The dugongs are dark-grey, smooth-skinned, have a split flipper-like tail, and are about half the size of the Florida manatee.

Manatees are tactile. When together they greet one another by pressing their snouts together, touching tail, or giving each other friendly bumps. They also



Manatee mail delivered rain or shine.

communicate by sound: a whistle, grunts, or chirps. Manatees have transparent eyelids to protect their eyeballs from saltwater. They can grow new teeth when the old ones become worn.

For a close-up encounter with this endearing, endangered gentle giant, the sleepy west central Florida town of Crystal River is one of the best places in the world to photograph manatees. The water visibility can be as clear as gin in the warm springs



Karen and her friend she couldn't get away from

and the temperature stays a constant 24°C (72°F). Since manatees are very hypothermic they spend most of the winter months congregating near the warm springs. A majority of the day is spent grazing on sea grass and the remainder is spent basking - or should I say sleeping – in the warmth of the spring. They languish at a preferred depth of 1.5 to 6 meters (5 to 20 ft) of water, periodically rising to the surface every 3 to 7 minutes for a breath of fresh air.

Manatees are the #1 employer in Crystal River. It's sort of a symbiotic relationship; manatees need man for

their protection and for their habitat and the town needs the manatees for their livelihood so they can prosper. Manatee paraphernalia is everywhere in Crystal River. They appear as mailboxes, and on t-shirts and license plates. Florida automobile owners paid \$20 extra for a "Save the Manatee" license plate. Some 95,000 were sold in 2002 with proceeds going toward marine research.

Peak manatee season is mid November to the end of March. Accommodations/ boat hire are plentiful at Crystal River at such places as Best Western, Port Hotel



A nursing calf under the protection of a patient mother.

& Marina Dive Centre. Commercial tour operators like American Pro diving Centre will gear you up and take you to the manatees. Two fun places to visit are Manatee Toy Company and Cabbage Palm (located at the Best Western Hotel). About 15 minutes south down the road from Crystal River is Homosassa Springs which also has a large manatee population. They also have the Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park and Visitor Centre; a great place to get manatee information. The Centre is a rehabilitation centre for sick or injured manatees. For more

information on the manatees: Florida Fish & Wildlife:

<http://Floridaconservation.org/psm>

and Save the Manatee Club:

www.savethemanatee.org

People once killed manatees for their succulent meat. Even back in the late 1800's, observers were predicting the animal's imminent extinction. One of the manatees close relative was the Steller's sea cow of the Bering Sea. This mammal was three times larger than the manatee, toothless, and sported a forked tail.



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Tony gets comfortable photographing manatees in the crystal clear springs.



By 1768 they were rendered extinct by hunters who prized its meat and skin.

The current fight to save manatees has shifted from hunting to boating. Since manatees swim near the surface and do not always react very quickly, they often fail to get out of harms way caused by an on-coming boat. Boat propellers slice their hides often with fatal consequences. Boat hulls and their keels crack manatee skulls and break their ribs. Manatee lungs are unique: they are flattened and elongated, extending horizontally along their back. The lungs help provide buoyancy in the right place to float horizontally. Because of this position, lungs can easily be

punctured by ribs broken during a boat collision.

In 2003 there were 380 known manatee deaths. One of the known leading causes has been collision with watercraft. These collisions have resulted in 73 deaths. Other causes of death are cold stress, natural (red tide), and perinatal. A natural threat to manatees called red tide is a water bacterium that turns the water red and can paralyze manatees preventing them from surfacing for air. Manatees have a thin layer of fat (blubber) and since they move very slowly they can become very hypothermic at water temperatures below 20°C (68°F) which could lead to shock and then death.

Since manatees are nomadic with no permanent home and are not territorial, nobody knows the exact manatee population in Florida. Aerial surveys are conducted in winter to get an approximation of their population. In 2004, the aerial survey counted 2,568 manatees. Manatees are protected under the federal Endangered Species Act and this makes killing a listed animal a crime. Recently there has been a fierce fight over the manatees. Advocates of the manatee say the creatures are barely hold their own and may be in peril while developers, anglers, and many boaters say that the population has rebounded and should be taken off the Endangered Species List. The dispute



We had the honor to work with fellow photographers and our friends Tony and Emiko Wu who traveled half way around the world from Singapore to photograph and be enchanted with these peaceful gentle giants.

concerns new regulations, intended to ensure the species survival, further limits not only development but also boater's access to certain water inhabited by manatees.

French filmmaker Jacques-Yves Cousteau read a story in September 1969 issue of National Geographic Magazine by Daniel Hartman called “Mermaids in Peril”. Cousteau produced a 1972 television documentary that heightened public awareness about the manatees. Then



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A gregarious, acrobatic manatee going for the barrel-roll

Severe propeller damage to manatee tails.



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in 1981 tropical troubadour Jimmy Buffett and then Florida governor Bob Graham met backstage at one of Buffett's concerts and decided to help start Save the Manatee Club. Today it has 41,000 members and Buffett still serves as co-chairman.

Archaeologists have inferred from the fossil records that manatees have been around the state of Florida for 44 million years. They are distant cousins of the elephants. With a slow reproduction rate at best, the female manatees give birth every 3 to 5 years: usually to one calf.

With a low reproductive rate, loss of habitat, and heated public discussion, these are critical times for

the manatee; a shy, chubby, peaceful, marine mammal, whose only defense is flight. The future of these gentle giants rest entirely in our hands

Gregory Sweeney

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Manatees: The Gentle Giants
Photographs by Gregory Sweeney Text by Karen Keberle

This book of over 70 full-color photographs presents an intimate portrait of manatees as they perform underwater acrobatics, pose for the camera, or lounge in the warm freshwater springs. Using his rapport with his subjects, the photographer captures not only the serene beauty of the springs, but also the manatees' natural curiosity and unusual physical traits. These beautiful photographs are an excellent introduction to the personalities of these leisurely vegetarians.

Size: 20cm x 20cm , 72 pages, hardback with a full color dust jacket

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