

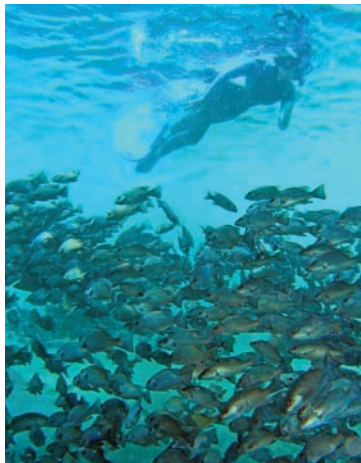
SWIMMING WITH MERMAIDS

story and photos by **George Perina**

Our Photo Editor recently went to Crystal River, Florida to photograph and learn more about manatees. These majestic creatures have quite a story to tell.

For Gulf Coast families a weekend outing to Florida typically begins the same way: beach towels are stowed, ice chests are packed, and fidgety children are carefully bundled into the car. Amidst a backdrop of excited squeals, parents look forward to the inviting allure of Florida's white sand beaches and the prospect of a restful day lounging in the sun. But for the children, Florida — with its fairy tale appeal of the *Magic Kingdom* and the possibility of encountering *Ariel*, *The Little Mermaid* — becomes an overwhelming need. Irresistible desire collides with irrepressible attraction. Predictably, restful relaxation often succumbs to the innocent pleasures of youth. But it doesn't have to be that way. In Florida there is another kingdom, equally magical, where both parents and children can hover in liquid space and float among modern day mermaids. It's called Crystal River.

One hundred and fifty miles south of Tallahassee, within the clear water that gives birth to the river's name, mermaids swim placidly alongside the citizens of Crystal River. Ancient mariners, spotting manatees at a distance, often mistook them for mermaids. Unfortunately they were also frequently mistaken for sirens: malevolent creatures of myth that blurred ships onto the rocks with the call of their hypnotic voices. The myth became so pervasive that manatees were eventually given the classification *Sirenidae* by biologists. But the reputation is wholly unjustified. Unlike the sirens of myth, manatees are docile creatures with tranquil dispositions. In spite of their often-menacing size, they are truly peaceful giants, herbivores who spend their lives meandering through the waterways of Florida in search of warm water and the next mouthful of aquatic plant life. >>



ABOVE: MANATEES, while large and intimidating, are actually very docile. **LEFT: DIVERS** come to Crystal River from all over the country to swim with manatees, but see a variety of marine life such as these grunts. **CENTER: A MANATEE CALF** hitches a ride with mom.

Today manatees coexist with their neighbors, a welcome sight to both locals and visitors alike. They've become such frequent guests to the area that they are now a landmark in Florida. And like the appeal of another Florida landmark, *Disney World*, their presence attracts people from all over the world. Visitors flock to the area to experience the joys of swimming alongside a gentle, 1000-pound mammal. Some adults can even weigh as much as 3000 pounds and grow to 12 feet in length. A day swimming among the graceful aquatic giants leaves the visitor with a sense of breathless wonder. They have become a cherished treasure to the locals. But their favored status is a relatively recent event.

Throughout their history manatees have been hunted for both food and sport. They were variously exploited as a source of meat and bones; their hide used for leather and their fat rendered into oil for lamps. Indifferent

boaters often ran over them, inflicting blunt force trauma with their hulls, or slashing the manatees with their propellers, leaving the manatees to die a slow death among the rivers and canals. Even today, a significant number of manatees still bear the scars of encounters with careless boaters, their backs crisscrossed with propeller scars, a demonstration of the dangers of living in proximity to humans. In a fitting bit of irony the distinctive scarring patterns are used by biologists to track individual manatees and study their population health.

Habitat destruction also caused population losses. The commercialization of waterfront property has led to the elimination of many of their natural grazing and breeding areas; damming of waterways altered their natural migratory patterns, forcing them to seek alternate routes to warm waters. Because of their susceptibility to cold, manatees must live in waters above 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

When they can't find warmer waters, they become sluggish, stop eating and die. The young are especially at risk, having less resilience than adults. Increased commercialization also means increased contact with humans, and many manatees run the risk of becoming entangled in fishing lines or ingesting human trash, leading to further manatee mortality. Manatees have been found crushed by canal locks and flood gates.

The danger to manatees was so great that by 1967 they were placed on *The Endangered Species List*. The largest species of the family, the Stellar Sea Cow, a gentle behemoth weighing up to four tons and measuring thirty feet long, was hunted to extinction in a mere 27 years. Of the remaining four species living today, all are imperiled to some degree.

In addition to the artificial threats imposed by man, manatees also suffer from natural calamities. In 1977, 1981, 1984, and 1989, unusually cold winters in Florida caused the water temperatures to drop, leading to the deaths of many manatees. Red tides — toxic algal blooms — have also taken their toll. For a creature with no natural enemies, the mortality rate has been staggering. But in spite of their dwindling numbers, an ironic twist of fate is helping to return them to healthier population levels.

Today the commercialization of manatees is actually *saving* their lives. They have become such a popular attraction in many areas that the lure of increasing tourist dollars promotes their safety. Swimming or diving with manatees has inspired the creation of a cottage industry devoted to bringing people and manatees together in a mutually-safe encounter. Dive shops and boat rental facilities are cashing in by facilitating manatee encounters. Each "That was the greatest thrill of my life!" exclamation is a marketer's dream-come-true, insuring return visits and guaranteed word-of-mouth advertising. But the arrangement only works if there is a healthy manatee population for tourists to interact with, so boating speed limits are imposed and fines levied for threatening or harassing the manatees in any way. The arrangement is mutually beneficial, taking a lesson from nature's fondness for symbiosis. But more important, each time a child proclaims excitedly, "I swam with a manatee!" it also serves to underscore another purpose: public awareness.

As the public perception of the manatee's plight increases, it fuels the need for private and public protection agencies, and in the case of manatees the result has been dramatic. Private organizations like *save themanatee.org*, coupled with public agencies like the *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*, have made tremendous headway in insuring that manatees will not only survive but also flourish. For them, the goal is not only to preserve

the manatees for this generation, but for the next. And the next. Happily, they are succeeding.

Like *Ariel, The Little Mermaid*, these modern day mermaids provoke a sense of enchantment with their Disney-like appeal. Their whiskered faces and soft, cow eyes make them endlessly fascinating to watch; creatures of almost mythic proportions that navigate the waterways in quiet grace. And for those fortunate enough to swim with them, it's a chance to re-experience the magic of childhood with a true icon of the waters. There really is a *Magic Kingdom* in Florida. And it can be found just inches beneath water.

MANATEE FACTS:

- Christopher Columbus was the first European to report seeing a manatee in the New World.
- Manatees are mammals and must surface to breathe. A manatee can hold its breath for 12 to 15 minutes, but typically surface more frequently.
- Manatees are herbivores, feeding on water hyacinth, hydrilla, and sea grasses. They spend 5 to 8 hours a day eating, and adults often eat more than 100 pounds of vegetation a day.
- Newborn calves weigh 60 to 70 pounds and are 4 to 4 1/2 feet long.
- In 1978, Florida designated the entire state as a "refuge and sanctuary for the manatees." The manatee is Florida's State Marine Mammal.
- There are four existing species of manatees worldwide. They include the Amazonian Manatee, in South America; the Dugong, in the Indo Pacific; The West African Manatee; and the West Indian Manatee found throughout the Caribbean. The Florida manatee is a subspecies of the West Indian Manatee.
- The Florida manatee occasionally ranges as far west as Louisiana and as far north as Maryland.
- Florida manatees live in fresh, salt and estuarine waters.
- Manatees communicate underwater by vocalizing.

