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Manatees merit sanctuary

BY TALLI NAUMAN/EL UNIVERSAL/The Herald
April 10, 2004

ot too long ago, I had the chance to do some work in Chetumal on the Yucatan Peninsula, so I thought I'd take advantage of the situation to look for manatees, which are supposed to be protected from extinction in the Chetumal Bay bordering on Belize there.



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All species of this marine mammal family are considered endangered everywhere in the world. They are thought to be the inspiration for the myth of mermaids that has captured the human imagination for centuries. But, paradoxically, their populations have dwindled as humans have become their one and only natural enemy.

Before we got a hold on ourselves and prohibited hunting them, many were killed for sport, meat, bones and fat. Man's penchant for the destruction of the members of their order led to the extermination of their close relative, the Steller's sea cow, within 27 years of its first recorded spotting in 1741.

Biologists are worried that manatees face the same fate. Now that all enjoy protected status, they are nonetheless threatened by encroaching development, boating collisions, water pollution, and the fad of underwater seismic and sonar experiments.

Limited in numbers and shy to begin with, the manatees did not appear to me during my visit to Quintana Roo state. The U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) says one of the reasons they don't come around so much there is that they are put off by the municipal sewage of Chetumal, which goes right into the bay untreated, much to the embarrassment of the local people.

So, recently I decided to check out this mysterious beast in captivity at Sea World in Florida, which is the state with the most manatees of the same kind as those in Quintana Roo, the West Indian species.

The aquarium's program informed visitors that the manatees have been around for a lot longer than us humans and that there are reasons for their existence, such as the fact that the otherwise seemingly slovenly, lumbering beasts clean excess growth from waterways in the process of keeping themselves fed.

The speaker asked members of the audience to take action to save the manatees, such as donating to rescue efforts and spreading the word about how to reduce their peril.

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So, I went right out and got myself a stuffed manatee, the proceeds of which went to fund manatee safety. In the process, I learned that Jimmy Buffett, a singer-songwriter who I thought did nothing more than swill margaritas on his yacht in his spare time, is the chairman of Save the Manatee Club.

Then I sat right down to write this opinion. I also learned a lot in researching it. For example, I learned that an April 6 letter to Mexican environmental authorities and the Foreign Ministry from Conservación de Mamíferos Marinos de México (Comarino), Defenders of Wildlife, and Greenpeace warns that U.S. agencies are overseeing a mission to use Mexican territorial waters to shoot off air guns and noisemakers to the detriment of marine mammals.

The letter states that the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have released documents suggesting that the operation could well cause the demise of some marine mammals protected under Mexican and international law. Yet, it says, the operators have failed to submit an environmental impact statement or any kind of official advisory to the Mexican government, as required.

The exploratory mission is scheduled to begin April 22 if nobody impedes it. Although it would occur on the opposite coast from the manatee habitat, it would wreak havoc with the eardrums of dolphins, whales and at least three other marine mammal species there. Since all marine mammals rely heavily on their hearing for survival, this case provides an example of one of the things that humans should prevent if we want to stop being enemies of manatees and other underwater members of our animal class.

Another thing we can do is try to reduce pesticide use and runoff in order to help clean up polluted water. We can call for adequate wastewater systems. Folks who have motor boats can make sure they run them at their slowest speed in manatee-inhabited waters. In Mexico, it's particularly important to resist mega-projects and strive for maintaining undeveloped beaches along the Caribbean coast. Impossible as the tasks may seem, we must hold the line on wetlands degradation.

Manatees already have disappeared from the Papaloapan River and Alvarado Lagoon in Veracruz state, probably as a result of the construction of the Miguel Alemán Dam, according to UNEP. It says oil pollution has contributed to their disappearance from the Coatzacoalcos River and elsewhere in Tabasco state. Meanwhile, inlets once important for manatees in the Cancun-Tulum corridor of the Yucatan have been altered for tourist attractions, such as those at Xel-ha and Xcaret.

As for the Bay of Chetumal, it is cited as one of the most important mating and calving areas of the western Caribbean. But I can only wonder if the manatees are gone from there forever, too. Will their presence go down in history for being as ephemeral as the glimpse of a mermaid? Or can we stop the raw sewage discharges and really give them sanctuary?

Talli Nauman is a founder and co-director of Journalism to Raise Environmental Awareness, a project initiated with support from the MacArthur Foundation in 1994. jaguar@infosel.net.mx

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