

# THE NEWS-PRESS

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6, 2009

## Lee County leads state in manatee deaths

More than 300 died in state waters last year

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Florida's manatees had another tough year in 2008, and Lee County led the state in boat-related manatee deaths.

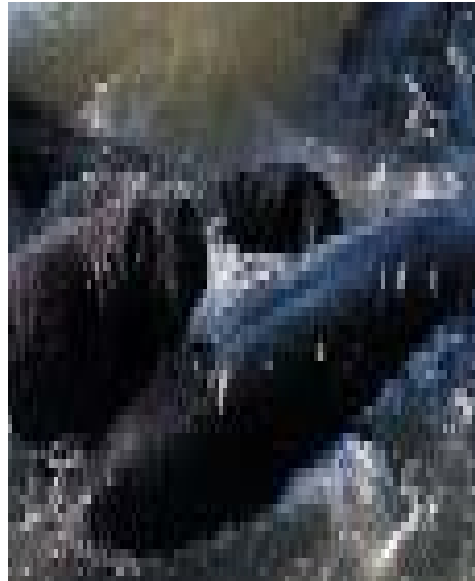
Statewide, 337 manatees died last year, including 45 in Lee County; it was the seventh time in the past 10 years that more than 300 manatees died in state waters.

From 1974 through 1995, the state recorded 200 or more dead manatees twice; since 1996, the lowest death count has been 232 in 1998; over the past 10 years, the average death count has been 333, and the record, set in 2006, is 417.

One reason for the apparent rise in manatee deaths is that more manatee carcass finds are reported, said Martine Dewitt, an associate research scientist at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute.

"We don't use these numbers to compare year to year," she said. "We use them to monitor trends. But whether the numbers are high or low, that doesn't mean the manatee population is going up or down."

Scientists at the state's Marine Mammal Pathobiology Laboratory in St. Petersburg documented a record 101 perinatal deaths.



A manatee mating herd was spotted by a beachgoer near the Sanibel Lighthouse last spring. In Lee County, 45 of the creatures died in 2008. (news-press.com file photo)

### Manatee facts

- Scientific name: *Trichechus manatus*
- Population in Florida: From Jan. 30 through Feb. 1, 2007, researchers counted 2,817 manatees, considered the minimum manatee population at that time.
- Size: Adults can reach 12.7 feet in length and weigh 3,500 pounds; average length is 9.8 feet, and average weight is 793 to 1,190 pounds.

Dependent calves of less than 5 feet in length that die near the time of birth and don't die from human-related causes are listed in the perinatal category.

Brevard County led the state in perinatal deaths with 34; Volusia County was second in perinatal deaths with 11, and Lee County was third with seven.

"Over the years, Brevard County always has high perinatal deaths," Dewitt said. "You're going to have a certain percentage of still-born calves or orphaned calves, and Brevard County is noted for its calving grounds. So it's just a

coincidence that a lot of females are in that location and give birth."

Boats killed 90 manatees last year in Florida, five short of the record, set in 2002.

"Even with boat deaths being below the record, it's close to the record, which is disappointing to me," said Pat Rose, executive director of the Save the Manatee Club. "In the past, when we've experienced a recession and increases in gas prices, we've seen a decrease in watercraft mortality. We didn't see that this year.

"I don't know how to explain it,

except that some areas just have so much boat traffic, and even if you reduce it, it's beyond the level that manatees can sustain."

For the sixth time in 10 years, Lee County led the state in boat-related manatee deaths (14) — in 2000, Lee and Brevard counties tied for the state lead with 13, and Lee County set a state record for boat-related manatee deaths in 2001 with 23.

Lee County is always at the top of the list of watercraft mortality because hundreds of manatees flock to the Florida Power & Light discharge in the Orange River during winter, Dewitt said; as area waters warm, manatees leave the Orange River, and many are hit by boats.

Despite a high body count and high watercraft mortality, there is some good news for manatees, Rose said.

"But not in Lee County," he said. "In Northwest Florida, the population is improving and increasing; in the Upper St. Johns River, the population is improving and increasing; on the east coast, it's hard to tell.

"In Southwest Florida, the population has been declining for eight to 10 years, and Lee County has a lot to do with that."

Watercraft mortality can be decreased by offering better education for boaters and making sure law enforcement on the water is adequately financed, Rose said.

Along with the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife and the Wildlife Advocacy Project, the manatee club has petitioned

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to designate more areas critical manatee habitat.

If an area is critical habitat, federal agencies must make sure their actions don't jeopardize listed species or destroy or adversely modify the habitat.

All of Charlotte Harbor, including Pine Island Sound, and the Caloosahatchee River downstream from the State Road 31 Bridge are critical manatee habitat.

"Here's the kicker," Rose said. "The Orange River is the most important warm-water refuge, but it's not critical habitat. We felt it was important to take a new look at where critical manatee habitat is."

Wildlife service spokesman Chuck Underwood pointed out that critical habitat designation applies only to federal agencies.

"While we acknowledged in our manatee recovery plan that, at some point, we should look at critical habitat, any place manatees occur, federal agencies are already consulting with us, whether it's critical habitat or not," Underwood said. "Is increasing critical manatee habitat going to reduce manatee mortality? The answer is probably not."