

Manatee Reclassification the Right Move

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The determination that manatees are not an endangered species is the correct outcome of the US Fish & Wildlife Service's years-long review of the iconic marine creature's status, according to Robert Atkins, president of Citizens For Florida's Waterways (CFFW), a Brevard County-based advocacy group for recreational boaters.

Originally founded in 1994 by Kennedy Space Center rocket scientists who oppose over-regulation, CFFW has long maintained that the species was incorrectly classified as endangered, a position that has been supported by the best available science for more than a decade.

"We are gladdened by this proper step forward, even as we are dismayed that it has taken so long to accomplish," said Atkins. "Politics and fear of lawsuits are what caused the delay."

Reclassification of manatees has been pending since 2007, when the USFWS first announced its intention to move manatees from the endangered list — meaning they were in imminent danger of extinction — to the "threatened" list, meaning they possibly could become at risk of extinction in the foreseeable future.

Atkins notes that delaying the decision longer than the decade it has taken would be a disservice to the integrity of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The people must have faith in the honest assessment of Government Agencies. In this case, Atkins emphasizes that the best available science confirms there is zero chance of manatee extinction over the next 100 years.

"Manatees should actually be classed as a "recovered" species — meaning they are neither endangered nor threatened, and not listed within the ESA" he stated.

CFFW has been leading a growing chorus of voices stating that perpetuation of the mistaken belief manatees are in danger of extinction has ironically become the greatest threat to the long-term success of the manatee. The reason: manatee population is expanding rapidly and in some areas, such as Brevard County and Citrus County, where thousands of animals now maintain a year-round presence, there are concerns about the ability of the estuaries to keep up with the pressures on seagrass. "Agencies like FWS took steps to attract manatees to Brevard's power plants, where warm water discharged into the Indian River Lagoon allows manatees to stay year-round. No one ever

anticipated thousands of animals eating seagrass here year-round,” said Atkins. “It’s like any pasture. Put too many animals on it, and don’t give the grass time to rest and recover, and the grass will suffer.”

CFFW maintains that if the seagrass goes, the Lagoon goes, too. “Saving the Lagoon is a priority. The kind of bureaucratic dawdling we saw on reclassification simply can’t be tolerated,” Atkins said.

CFFW is working to redirect the focus of regulatory agencies away from penalizing boaters — through the closure of watersports areas, ever-increasing numbers of slow-speed zones, and expensive conditions for constructing and maintaining access facilities like boat ramps — to develop new management strategies to maintain a healthy manatee herd that will be a benefit, and not a negative impact, on waterways.

“Because endangered status meant the animal was legally considered “depleted,” regulators felt compelled to take only those actions they believed would increase the manatee population,” Atkins explained. “Whether their regulatory actions were effective remains a matter of debate, but it is abundantly clear that agency focus should have shifted years ago.”

Citizens For Florida’s Waterways is a not-for-profit boating advocacy organization based in Merritt Island, FL. Its all-volunteer Board of Directors founded CFFW in 1994.