

June 5, 2006

Mr. Rodney Barreto, Chairman  
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission  
Farris Bryant Building  
620 South Meridian Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600  
Via email: [commissioners@myfwc.com](mailto:commissioners@myfwc.com)

Dear Commissioners:

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the proposed downlisting of the Florida manatee. After reviewing the *Final Biological Status Review of the Florida Manatee*, Audubon is concerned with the apparent discrepancy between the relatively poor outlook for the manatee described in the report and the conclusion that the manatee should be downlisted to the threatened category. Audubon asks the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to maintain the endangered status of the manatee while it examines the goals, procedures, and consequences of its listing program. The Commission should consider how an endangered species could be recommended for downlisting in a report that states the general expectation for the manatee population is that it will decline over the next 5 generations (among many other concerns for the future of the manatee).

The Biological Status Review describes the threats facing the manatee and how they are expected to become even greater in the future:

Threats encompass anthropogenic factors and catastrophic natural events that could cause declines in reproductive and survival rates or loss and degradation of habitat. The largest known cause of human-related mortality of manatees in Florida is watercraft collisions. Watercraft strikes result in numerous injuries and deaths each year. The future of the Florida manatee is jeopardized by the predicted loss and deterioration of warm-water habitat, including retirement or deregulation of aging power plants and reduction in natural spring flows.

All of the anthropogenic threats to the manatee are expected to increase as the Florida population grows, including strikes by watercraft. Warm-water habitat from either power plants or natural springs is admitted to face an uncertain future. Of great concern is the statement that red tides, events that can kill large numbers of manatees in a short period, “appear to be occurring at greater frequencies than in the past.” All of these factors taken together portray a very uncertain future for the manatee. It is hard to understand how an endangered species can be downlisted while the threats facing the species are growing and modeling predicts the population will most likely decline in the future.

It is important for FWC to realize that their decisions on listing categories have significant ramifications on the protection that is afforded a species, despite many FWC statements to the contrary (including a statement in the agenda for the June 2006 meeting). This contradiction is evident within the updated Imperiled Species Listing Process FAQ on the FWC website. In one sentence it states that protection is based on the conservation needs of a species and not on its classification. Then, in the next sentence it mentions county and other local government protections that are lost when a species is reclassified. The FAQ does not mention that there are additional statewide protections that are lost, including those governing developments of regional impact found in Chapter 9 of the Florida Administrative Code. The scope of the issue became apparent several years ago when FWC staff were asked to research how common references to the listing categories were in various rules and regulations throughout the state. Their initial search found over 500 references to the listing categories determined by FWC. It is apparent that changing the listing category of a species can affect the level of protection afforded that species.

Audubon asks the commission to retain the endangered classification of the manatee given the growing threats facing the manatee population, their slow recovery time, and the fact that two of the four subpopulations would be classified as endangered if considered separately. We thank you for this opportunity to comment on the look forward to working with the FWC on this and other matters vital to the protection of Florida's incredible biodiversity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'DA Anderson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Anderson  
Executive Director  
Audubon of Florida

cc: Mr. David K. Meehan, Vice Chairman  
Mr. H.A. Huffman  
Ms. Kathy Barco  
Mr. Richard A. Corbett  
Mr. Brian S. Yablonski  
Ms. Sandra T. Kaupe  
Mr. Kenneth D. Haddad, Executive Director