

Seagrass Awareness Month Brings Critical Food Source for Manatees to Center Stage

March is Seagrass Awareness Month and Save the Manatee® Club is urging the public to take action to protect seagrass communities across Florida.

LONGWOOD, FLORIDA, USA, February 29, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- March is Seagrass Awareness Month, and there has never been a more critical time to act to protect seagrass communities across Florida and call to action for everyone to contribute to the health of these vital ecosystems. The state's manatee population has now suffered four years of elevated mortality rates, largely due to seagrass loss. While the reduced mortality rate in 2023 may signal some progress, it still underscores the ongoing need for awareness and conservation efforts.



Recent years have seen a critical decline in seagrass, leading to devastating consequences for manatees. In 2021, a record number of manatees died, with many dying of starvation within the Indian River Lagoon (IRL). Nutrient pollution, resulting in widespread algae blooms, caused a catastrophic loss of seagrass, leaving manatees to starve. This alarming situation prompted the declaration of an Atlantic Florida Manatee Unusual Mortality Event in 2021, which is still ongoing and under close monitoring.

In 2023, there were over 550 recorded manatee deaths in Florida, on top of the record number recorded in 2021 of 1,101, followed by 800 recorded manatee deaths in 2022. While the number of manatees starving from a lack of seagrass was lower last winter, the situation remains dire because human-caused nutrient pollution remains much too high. Due to high water levels in Lake Okeechobee, we are already seeing discharges to both coasts, dangerously affecting water quality and possibly the seagrass communities.

Manatees rely on seagrass as a vital food source. There are seven species of seagrass in Florida, all of which are consumed by manatees. However, the IRL, a critical manatee habitat, has lost over 95% of its seagrass biomass due to human-induced harmful algal blooms. On the West Coast, Tampa Bay has lost 12% of its seagrass in 2 years, with some areas at historic lows, and Sarasota Bay has lost approximately 30% of its seagrass since 2016. While habitat restoration projects are underway, and there have been some signs that seagrass communities may be rebounding in some areas of the IRL, ultimate success depends upon avoiding future harmful algal blooms by continuing to improve overall water quality.

Patrick Rose, Aquatic Biologist and Executive Director of the Save the Manatee Club, emphasized the importance of Seagrass Awareness Month, stating, "Manatees and seagrass communities have co-evolved over millions of years. Seagrass Awareness Month is an important opportunity to spotlight this critical aquatic resource. Uncontrolled development, lax regulation, and pollution from Florida's growing human population have fueled the cycle of algae blooms that cause seagrass loss."

For its part, Save the Manatee Club has long worked with partners to rehabilitate and protect Florida's waterways. Recently, it partnered with the Center for Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife to file a suit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for failing to revise outdated critical habitat for Florida manatees, which has not been updated since its original designation in 1976. As a result, it was announced in June 2022 that FWS has committed to revising critical habitat for the Florida manatee by 2024. In May 2022, the same three groups, together with Earth Justice, sued the Environmental Protection Agency for failing to protect manatees from water pollution in Florida. The case is still pending.

Members of the public are encouraged to take action to protect seagrass and manatees by:

- Taking the pledge to be [Fertilizer-Free™ For Manatees](#), thus helping to reduce pollution from yard chemicals, which will help prevent harmful algal blooms from forming.
- Preventing damage to seagrasses by avoiding boating over seagrass beds or trimming up the boat's motor and idling to a safe depth before getting on plane.
- Reporting distressed, sick, injured, or dead manatees to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 1-888-404-FWCC (3922).
- Resisting the urge to feed or give water to manatees, which is illegal and can negatively impact their natural behavior.
- Sign up for our [Action Alerts](#) and contact local, state, and federal elected officials to urge them to help manatees and restore the seagrasses throughout Florida.

Seagrass Awareness Month serves as a reminder of the urgent need to protect seagrass communities and the manatees that depend on them. By working together, we can ensure a brighter future for these iconic marine mammals and their vital habitats. Rose concluded, "Everyone must act now—from the individual members of the public to governmental and nonprofit organizations to our elected officials—to disrupt this cycle of pollution and proceed to

protect and rebuild the seagrass communities that are essential to the survival of manatees and a host of other species, including fishes, dolphins, sea turtles, and birds that collectively depend on this critical aquatic resource.”

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Save the Manatee Club, established in 1981 by the late renowned singer-songwriter, author, and entrepreneur Jimmy Buffett, along with former Florida Governor and U.S. Senator Bob Graham, is dedicated to safeguarding manatees and preserving their aquatic habitat. For more information about manatees and the Club’s efforts, visit [savethemanatee.org](https://www.savethemanatee.org) or call 1-800-432-JOIN (5646).

Stephanie Cohen
Save the Manatee Club
+1 407-539-0990
media@savethemanatee.org

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