



FWC Update

Manatee deaths in 2007 below the five-year average

A preliminary report from the FWC indicates there were 317 manatee deaths in state waters in 2007. The total number of carcasses falls below the five-year average of 355.

Watercraft strikes and red tide continue to contribute to a high percentage of manatee mortality, accounting for more than half of the total deaths where scientists could determine the cause of death. Necropsy results identify watercraft strikes as the cause of 73 deaths and red tide as responsible for 52 deaths.

FWC researchers report that watercraft and red tide-related deaths were high in Southwest Florida. The combination of these factors was identified as a concern for this region in the recently approved manatee management plan.

The FWC uses trends in mortality figures to monitor ongoing and emerging threats to the manatee population. A recent report analyzing threats to the species, coauthored by researchers from the United States Geological Survey and the FWC, points to watercraft-related mortality as the most significant long-term threat to the manatee population. However, the FWC is encouraged that the number of watercraft-related deaths in 2007 is below the five-year average.

The FWC is committed to conservation actions that reduce human-caused manatee deaths. The FWC's manatee management plan outlines measures to address watercraft-related mortality, as well as other threats facing the manatee population.

To report a dead or injured manatee, call the FWC Wildlife Alert hotline at 888-404-FWCC.

For more information on manatee mortality research, visit research.MyFWC.com/manatees.



FWC FILES

FWC commissioners honor employees

Dec. 5 was a special day for several FWC employees attending the December meeting in Key Largo. Commissioners recognized and presented awards to employees for their years of service, dedication, achievements and heroism.

Two former commissioners also accepted FWC resolutions recognizing their service - Sandra Kaupe for her five years and David Meehan for eight years on the Commission.



TIM DONOVAN

Dr. C. Tom Rainey (black jacket) presents Victor Heller with the 2007 Louise Ireland Humphrey Achievement Award as commissioners (from left to right) Ron Bergeron; Kenneth Wright; Rodney Barreto; Richard Corbett; Brian S. Yablonski; Kathy Barco and Dwight Stephenson look on.

Dr. C. Tom Rainey of the Wildlife Foundation of Florida presented the 2007 Louise Ireland Humphrey Achievement Award to Victor Heller, assistant executive director of the FWC. The annual award honors FWC employees for outstanding service to the agency.

Commissioners also honored Jeffery Bass and Capt. James Koch, fishing guide, for their heroic efforts during a rescue operation of a boating accident victim in Key Largo.

Jack Beal of Shikar-Safari Club International presented the 2007 Shikar-Safari Club International Officer of the Year Award to FWC Officer Brad Stanley.

John White, retiring after 30 years of service from the FWC, also enjoyed a moment in the spotlight.

"These awards recognize individuals who have gone above and beyond what their normal job requires," said FWC Chairman Rodney Barreto. "They exemplify what it means to work for the FWC."

The FWC also honored Vic Dunaway, outdoor writer and founding editor of *Florida Sportsman* magazine, for his contributions to fish and wildlife conservation.

The FWC presents awards during its final meeting each year.

FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute scientist is named Biologist of the Year

The Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) recognized FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) scientist Wesley Porak as Fisheries Biologist of the Year.

At this year's annual meeting, SEAFWA honored Porak, an FWC research scientist working at the FWRI Eustis Fisheries Research Laboratory, for his contributions to fisheries conservation.

"This award is particularly

prestigious for a conservation agency scientist, because it amounts to recognition from his distinguished colleagues, and it reflects great credit on this whole agency," said Ken Haddad, FWC executive director.

With 25 years of experience, Porak commits himself to excellence in largemouth bass research, management and conservation. Along with colleagues, he helped develop techniques to determine largemouth bass growth rates,

ages, longevity and survival in Florida water bodies.

In addition to the award presented to Porak, FWC also won a diversity award for minority recruitment, and Ken Haddad received an award for his service as past president of SEAFWA.

SEAFWA is composed of agencies responsible for management and protection of the fish and wildlife resources from 16 states, Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands.

FWC wraps up Key Largo meeting

The FWC wrapped up a two-day meeting Dec. 6 at Key Largo after wading through an eventful agenda.

Commissioners voted to approve the Florida Manatee Management Plan, effectively establishing a comprehensive plan that lays out all the realistic measures the state can take to nurture the species away from the threat of extinction. The plan also includes measurable goals for the manatee's recovery. It marks the first time Florida has had a management plan for the species.

Commissioners voted to defer a proposal to reclassify manatees from endangered to threatened on the state's imperiled species list. Meanwhile, commissioners directed FWC staff to research options for revising the agency's imperiled-species classification process.

Also, commissioners heard an update on a proposed management plan and associated rules concerning the bald eagle. Final action on those proposals will take place at a later meeting.

The Commission approved acquisition of the 1,148-acre Dunham Ranch in Polk County as a mitigation park and acquisition of the 1,652-acre Lucky L Ranch in Osceola County as an addition to the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area.



JACK ROGERS

The FWC is involved in a variety of activities associated with bald eagles, including documentation of eagle nesting territories, technical assistance requests and scientific research.

Commissioners re-elected Rodney Barreto to be the seven-member commission's chairman and Brian Yablonski to be vice chairman for 2008.

Commissioners also approved final adoption of rules to clear up the FWC's due process procedures and delegations of authority.

In addition, commissioners approved a new rule to require owners of Class I (potentially very dangerous) animals to contact the FWC immediately in the event of an animal escape. It also requires owners to keep records of names, addresses and phone numbers of adjacent property owners

for notification in case a dangerous animal escapes.

Concerning marine issues, commissioners proposed draft rule proposals from the FWC's Spiny Lobster Advisory Board. The board's proposals include extending the current moratorium on the spiny lobster trap reduction schedule, allowing two different spiny lobster endorsement holders to pull traps from the same vessel, revert trap certificates not paid for to the FWC after two years instead of three and prohibit the harvest of all egg-bearing lobsters. A final public hearing on these proposed rules will be held in April in Tallahassee.

In other marine fisheries actions, commissioners approved the proposed marine fisheries work plan for 2008-09, discussed ways to better incorporate FWC input into the federal fisheries management process and considered various federal fisheries management issues.

The Commission adopted resolutions honoring former commissioners Herky Huffman, Sandra Kaupe and David Meehan.

The complete agenda is available at MyFWC.com/commission/2007/Dec07/index.html.

The next FWC meeting is set for April 9-10 in Tallahassee.

A ride of remembrance

Officers from the FWC participated in a charity bicycle ride, known as the Tour de Force, on the sunny Monday morning of Dec. 3, 2007. The ride started in North Miami Beach and ended at Daytona Beach Shores, for a total of 270 miles. Not all officers went the entire length. The ride was divided into legs; the first leg, which seven FWC officers participated in, was 49 miles.

The money raised from this event goes to the families of Florida police officers who have been killed in the line of duty throughout the year. There were 16 families of fallen police officers who will receive the contributions, including the families of two fallen FWC officers – Lt. Del Teagan and Inv. Michelle Lawless. In 2007, 150 officers bicycled in the event, and \$5,900 was raised.



Left to right, front row: Ofc. Daniel Miranda, Lt. Alfredo Escanio, Ofc. Jorge Pino, Ofc. Manny Padilla. **Back row:** Lt. Alberto Maza, Ofc. Santiago Ayala, Lt. Christian Rodriguez

FWC FILES

“Eyes in the skies” locate lawbreakers

If you’re going to break the law, be careful. You never know who might be watching.

The FWC’s Aviation Section at Lake City has a new weapon in its arsenal to protect the state’s valuable natural resources. The Bell 206 L4 Long Ranger helicopter will enhance search-and-rescue and other law enforcement operations in the FWC’s North Central Region.

“We fast-forwarded about 35 years in technology,” said Lt. Joe Johnston, a pilot who has been with the Commission for nearly 30 years. “We replaced our 1970s-era military surplus OH-58 helicopter with this one.

“If you’re lost, we will find you. If you’re on the run, we will find you,” Johnston said. “With the technology we have on this helicopter, we can fly at night with impunity.”

The Long Ranger is equipped with SX16 Night Sun, a 30-million-candlepower searchlight, and night-vision equipment.

“I can’t overemphasize that during all our patrols, our main focus is resource protection and boating safety,” Johnston said. “But during these patrols, FWC officers do run

into a wide variety of violations, and they act upon them.”

One night, as Johnston flew over Alachua County at about 7,500 feet, wearing night-vision goggles, he saw a tiny light flickering on and off in the Grove Park Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

“Because the light flicked on and off so quickly, I wasn’t sure what I was seeing,” Johnston said. “I circled around again, concentrating on where I saw the light. I directed Officer Sam Dishman to the area to check it out.”

Dishman noticed a vehicle parked in the WMA. He went to the vehicle and observed the driver smoking what appeared to be crack cocaine. The light Johnston had seen was the man’s lighter flicking on and off while he smoked the illegal substance. Dishman arrested the man for possession of cocaine, possession of drug paraphernalia and for not purchasing a recreational use permit for the area.

On another night, while flying over Columbia County, Johnston noticed a vehicle driving erratically. He directed an officer to the vehicle, which had ended up in a ditch after the driver attempted to execute a three-point turn. The officer determined the man had been driving under the influence, registering .165 on the breathalyzer test. He charged the man with DUI and with possessing an open container of alcohol.

These flights require a team effort. The officers rely on Johnston to direct them to the suspicious activity, while Johnston relies on the officers to make the cases.

“The officers on the ground are the ones who walk up to the vehicles in remote areas and confront a potential violator. Without the officers, I’m not effective at all.” Johnston said.

“With the aircraft and the night-vision goggles, if someone is doing something in the area we’re working, it doesn’t go unnoticed,” Johnston said. “People often forget to look up to see who’s watching.”



Lt. Joe Johnston with the new Bell 206 L4 Long Ranger helicopter, stationed in the FWC’s North Central Region.

KAREN PARKER