

Saving grace

They may not look it, but manatees are graceful and caring creatures that are being endangered by the carelessness of humans

Story by Ava Chisling

Full-figured Juliet weighs more than 2,500 pounds but her doctor assures me she is not fat. Dr Michael Renner has worked with manatees for 15 years and says, 'I have seen overweight animals and she is not one of them'; Juliet has been living in a Miami Seaquarium tank for more than 50 years and she occupies a good portion of her home just by floating there, motionless.

Describing a manatee to someone who has never seen one is not an easy task. Known as the 'sea cow', they look like very large sausage rolls with tiny heads. They have two short forelimbs with nails on each and a huge paddle-like tail to guide them. They spend most of their days slowly floating and rolling just under the water line. In the wild, they cruise up and down the eastern US coastline, sometimes drifting as far north as Rhode Island, and returning south to Florida when the weather cools down. That is a trip of more than 1,300 miles each way!

Manatees have an air of quiet dignity about them with a calm gracefulness in water and a curious nature that belies their wrinkled, tough exterior. The manatee look pre-historic and wise. Yet they are social, loving animals who constantly touch, push and play together. The females



take care of their own young and sometimes those of their fellow manatees, as well. In fact, on 20 April 2006, nine-foot long Ocean Reef gave birth to twins named Pumpkin and Patch at the Seaquarium. The black, plump babies weighed in at 18 and 19 kilograms respectively. They will nurse for 14 to 16 months and will be dependent on adults until they are two years old.

Dr Renner loves the manatee but he is only too aware that their survival in the wild is under threat. He is convinced they would get more attention from the public if they were cuter. Janice Nearing, of the Save The Manatee Club, disagrees, 'I have never understood it when some people claim that manatees are not cute. I think they are the poster mammals for cute! Just take a good, long look at those wrinkly, cherubic faces. The 'awww' factor is huge!'

The first time Nearing saw a sea cow she was smitten. 'I had to force myself to leave the manatee exhibit at Sea World. I was completely

fascinated by them. I watched, transfixed, as they did barrel rolls and head stands. I adored their graceful moves and the amusing looks they would get on their loveable faces.'

Manatees can eat up to 10 percent of their body weight each day, which for Juliet is equal to downing an adult male every 24 hours. But don't fret. These animals are giant but they are entirely gentle, friendly and curious characters. They are also strict vegetarians, eating primarily sea grass in the wild, and a tank full of salad in captivity. The sea cow is a calm, non-aggressive creature whose closest relative is not the walrus or the seal as one might think looking at their whiskers and tubular bodies – it's the elephant. 'See how she uses her snout?' says Dr. Kenner as Juliet comes up for a breath of air. 'It is like an elephant's trunk.'

The manatee lives in shallow water and that is part of their problem. Generally, if the sun reaches the bottom of the water, the manatee will find growing sea grass. Where you find food, you will find the manatee, says Dr Renner. The difficulty is that humans are also attracted to shallow warm water and they have killed and maimed the sea cow to the point of putting them on the endangered species list. The manatee have been run over by boaters, snared in the lines of fishermen, caught in the traps of crabbers and in the plastic garbage left behind by everybody. Looking down over the small group here at the Seaquarium, you can see the scars inflicted by their encounters with man – a missing tail, deep slash wounds across their backs from boat blades and for the twins' mom Ocean Reef, a punctured lung.

'I don't think people intend to hurt them, but they do. We don't have enough police to catch boaters as they speed in shallow water so we are counting on educating the children. We hope that when the kids see the "slow down, manatee ahead" sign in the water, they will tell their mom or dad to stop speeding.'

Adds Nearing, 'As more people get actively involved and really start to understand and care about what's happening to manatees, there's a better chance these precious, harmless animals will get more help and protection. There are certain areas where the manatee are safe from ▶



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humans but for the most part, they must live side-by-side and the gentle giant is getting slaughtered. Manatees face ever-increasing threats, mostly from human activities. Protection regulations must remain intact. We need more enforcement on the waterways. Their habitat must be protected. We need to balance boating access with protecting our manatees and other aquatic resources,' says Nearing.

'We rescue them, heal them and get them back out to the wild whenever possible,' says Dr Renner. 'We don't own them. They stay here temporarily and then leave.'

Interestingly, despite all the amazing advances in veterinarian medicine since Juliet turned up in the 1950s, the doctors here have to count on good old-fashioned techniques to nurse the animals back to health. 'There is not an MRI big enough on this planet that could accommodate a 2,500 pound animal. The same holds true for x-rays'. So the vets rely on simple techniques, which sound similar to a visit to our own general practitioner; they watch their eating habits, their general behaviour and take blood tests of the wounded animal.

'There are only a few of us who care for the manatee and we are all in touch,' says Dr Renner. But without the precision of medical technology to make exact diagnoses on the wounded animals, the doctors not only have to assess their health but also their likelihood of surviving once released. That is when the arguments occur, as there are no guarantees and no clear answers. For example, the goal is to release Ocean Reef and her twins into the wild. The question for the experts is when is the best time to do so. And once they are free, how will they fare among the boaters, the fishermen and deteriorating environmental conditions in general?

That question is not for Dr Renner but for all of us as we are responsible for keeping the manatee safe. A commitment not to run them over with speed-boats or strangle them with rubbish should be fairly easy to make. ■



Saving the manatee

Save The Manatee Club was co-founded by American singer Jimmy Buffett, famous for his song *Margaritaville*. The Club recently provided film props to the family movie, *Hoop*, and Buffett both contributed to the soundtrack and stars as a marine scientist in the film.

Janice Nearing of the Club describes the many ways you can get involved in helping the manatee. 'Volunteers are always needed and highly appreciated at the Save The Manatee Club. Florida volunteers can sign up for the manatee-sighting network and help provide valuable information to researchers who are tracking manatees. You can also give presentations at schools, organisations and community events as well as help staff education tables at festivals and fairs. Everyone, whether they live in state, out of state, or in another country entirely, can join our free Email Action Alert Team, so they can receive notices of issues that are important for manatee protection and the actions they can take to help them. People are also encouraged to sign up for our free Paddle Tales E-Newsletter for more manatee information.'

Another great way to get involved is by becoming a member of Save The Manatee Club. You become a member by adopting a manatee from our three adoption programmes. The Club is a membership-based, national non-profit organisation that is funded primarily by the Adopt-A-Manatee programme. Funds go towards public awareness and education programmes, manatee research, rescue and rehabilitation efforts, and advocacy and legal action. The adoption package includes an adoption certificate, photo and biography of a real Florida manatee, a membership handbook, and the Club sends or emails you a newsletter, *The Manatee Zone*, four times a year.

See www.savethemanatee.org for complete details and more information.