

Key Opinion

Man-Oh-Man-Oh-Manatee

Richard L. Hershatter
Contributing Columnist

*All the world loves a lover,
And the manatee as well.
But that concept doesn't cover
All the places where they dwell.*

Who does not love the ungainly sea cow, pursuing its herbivorous search for sustenance in the warm waters along Florida's lengthy seacoast?

Long categorized as an endangered species, the half-ton mammals were estimated to number only 1,200 twenty years ago, and the state promulgated regulations designed to protect them and their access to the warm waters of creeks and rivers in which they sheltered during cold weather.

Florida's Motor Vehicle Department even issued a special license plate depicting the manatee's image and carrying the legend "Save the Manatee." A portion of the proceeds from their sale is earmarked for preservation of the species.

Last month, however, in spite of protests from environmentalists, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission decided to remove the manatee from the endangered species list and carry it as merely "threatened."

At the same time, the agency demoted bald eagles from the threatened classification to the "special concern" list.

This column has no quarrel with the action taken on the bald eagle. (Although with the development of Rogaine, there is no longer any reason for an eagle to stay bald.)

Where manatees are concerned, however, conservationists have a valid objection.

Because the huge mammals often forage near the surface, whirling propellers frequently come in contact

with the thin skin on their backs, resulting in injuries and death.

Among the steps previously taken by state and various localities are restrictions on building docks, together with the establishment of no-wake zones, which limit boat speeds within areas frequented by the mammals.

These various safeguards seem to have worked. Last month, the Associated Press reported that recent estimates now place the manatee population at 3,116.

Unfortunately, the protective classifications have always been anathema to testosterone-driven owners of cigarette boats and other high-speed craft. Their lobbyists have exerted constant pressure on governments at all levels to ease up on or eliminate restrictions.

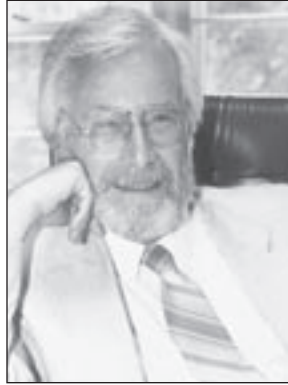
Like the proverbial camel's nose sticking into the tent, the move to lower classification presages a relaxation of protections that can only lead to an increase in manatee mortality.

Last year nearly 400 of the creatures died. Eighty of the deaths were from direct contact with speedboats and an equal amount from civilization-induced blooms of red tide. That many deaths represent over thirteen per cent of the total estimated population.

If one were to apply the percentage of deaths to the human population of the United States, for example, it would mean annual deaths of approximately thirty-six million people.

A disaster of that magnitude would suggest a major plague, equivalent to the effects of nuclear warfare.

The reclassification vote of the seven-member



Commission was unanimous, which puzzles observers, because state scientists have predicted a 50% drop in the manatee population over the next fifty years. According to the Bradenton Herald, the steep increase in mortality will stem largely from loss of habitat, collisions with boats and the suffocating effects of red tide algae blooms.

The move to reduce manatee protection was initiated by a petition from a lobbying group, ironically named the Coastal Conservation Association of Florida, which works on behalf of boating and fishing organizations. (Manatees do not belong.)

Environmentalists and conservationists, such as the Save the Manatee Club and the Defenders of Wildlife and Ocean Conservancy, are adamantly opposed to the downgrading. Their fear, among other things, is that there will be a loss of state funding for research and protection of the slow-moving sea cow.

Fortunately, both the manatee and the bald eagle remain covered by the 1973 federal Endangered Species Act, which is unaffected by the state commission's recent action. Rules put in place by counties and cities are similarly unaffected.

Hopefully, continued vigilance by concerned citizens will counteract the pressure brought by paid lobbyists, but don't hold your breath.

***When the actions of mankind tend to endanger
The existence of all creatures, great and small,
Then all must join, both citizen and stranger,
To take whatever steps will save them all.***

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An Open Letter to Congress

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Contributing Columnist

If you've noticed, resolutions or letters are in vogue today. The G-8 leaders produced one on the trouble in the Mideast, and we are asking the U.N. to get one ready for both Iran and North Korea. Well, here is one for the U.S. Congress.

To the U.S. Congress

A great deal is going on in the world today, much of it is not good, and I don't think very many of you are really paying attention.

Gasoline is now over \$3.00 a gallon. That is not the worst thing that could happen to this country, but if the Mideast keeps erupting into conflict, we might not even be able to get sufficient oil supplies. Stop talking this energy-independence nonsense and work for realistic reductions to our demand for oil — nuclear power, coal gasification, more drilling in the U.S., including Alaska. Remember the "Carter gas lines" of the 70s? It did wonders for his political career and gas lines will do wonders for yours. Keep that in mind.

Remember the stock market boom in the late 90s and the Abramoff and K Street lobbyist scandal of 2004? Your reaction to these events is instructive.

If you had gone after corruption of Wall Street crooks, and in the Congress itself, with the same enthusiasm Ken Starr went after Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski, we would have had real Congressional reform. An additional benefit would have been that Ken Lay would not have died at his vacation home in Aspen, without ever entering prison. Lay would have been in a jail cell interacting with "Tiny," his new significant other when he was, as the Methodists say, "called home."

You Republican members have Abramoff and the K-Street lobbying scam hanging around your neck like a dead fish. The problem with both of your parties is that you seem to think it is not a not problem to be solved, but rather something in which to seek political advantage.

Once again, the Congress, as an institution, flunked

the smell test. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) put together a comprehensive reform package limiting lobbyists paying for your travel, among other needed reforms. For once the Senate acted with bi-partisan fervor — you turned down the reforms and instead enacting a measure that would require lobbyists to report more of their activities. The rather odd theory here is that the public would be reassured if they only knew just how venal the system was.

During all this trouble — the Iraq war, stock market fraud, and the health care crisis — we would watch CSPAN, and what did we see? Members of each party pointing their fingers at the other, like some demented Greek chorus chanting, "It is their fault."

That is, when you were even paying attention to the big issues, which wasn't often. Republicans seemed obsessed with the idea that two people of the same sex getting married might sink the 2000-year-old institution of marriage. Don't worry guys; if Hollywood can't sink the institution we have nothing to worry about with a few gay couples. Then some idiot from Oklahoma gave a speech claiming a sponge appearing on PBS (Sponge Bob Square Pants) might be gay. This was followed by another stalwart member of the Republican caucus upset because Sesame Street had introduced an HIV-positive Muppet. Forget the Iraq war, the economy, taxes, wages, education, and health care — be sure to reign in the gay sponges and Muppets. Remember, most people are busy making a living and raising a family. They don't have the time or inclination to join you in worrying about whether or not the less righteous are offending your code of conduct.

When your Republican majority, and not a few of you Democrats, weren't tripping over themselves worrying



about everyone's sexual orientation, you seemed to obsess about someone burning the flag, or taking God out of the Pledge of Allegiance. Well, I have news for you busybodies. Patriotism and God don't need your protection; indeed, both do better without it. The only time people at the ballpark really pay attention to the National Anthem is after some pencil-necked geek has burned a flag in front of the Supreme Court building in Washington. History teaches us patriotism and religion flourish only when under attack. Not surprisingly, both stagnate when mandated or protected by the government. So do us all a favor and keep your legislative hands off the flag and the Bible.

You Democratic members in both the House and Senate never seem to have a solution to any of our problems except to say whatever the Republicans are doing is wrong — especially in Iraq. Talk about a one-trick pony. Democrats, you gave Bush the authority, or at least a large majority of you did, to go into Iraq. Now some of you are bailing out with the Bush-lied-us-into-war chant or the we-didn't-know-he would-muck-up-the-aftermath chant. That is no excuse. After all, you've been telling us how stupid the President is since 2000, then you up and gave him authority to start a war. You obviously don't pay attention to your own propaganda. The fact is, Bush went into Iraq and he went in with your approval. A word here: if you are part of the deal, you get part of the blame.

Come on folks, some gumption here. The decision to go in may have been wrong but, as one Democrat said, "...our national honor demands that, having invaded their country, we not abandon the Iraqi people to chaos and sectarian violence." The Democrat in question is Will Marshall, a founder of the Democratic Leadership Council. There are a lot of us Democrats who agree with him, but right now we are like a group standing on the Titanic, looking at an iceberg, after being told we are a bit short of lifeboats. Sink with the ship or jump into the ice-cold Republican waters. Or be pushed in as the loony left is trying to do to Joe Lieberman in Connecticut.

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