

All boaters need a safety course –

January 3, 2021



Sarah Gledhill in Gainesville speaking against toll roads. Photo by Jim Tatum.

Not only do boaters need a course in safety to protect manatees, they also need it [to protect humans](#). Sarah Gledhill works hard for the environment, the waters and the wildlife and OSFR thanks her for her tireless efforts to leave us a better world.

Manatees are often seen in the Santa Fe River below Dunigan's mill near Ginnie Springs. Usually the water in the rapids is too shallow to allow them upstream from that point. During the winter they often hang out in the Ichetucknee at the confluence with the Santa Fe since the water there is warmer in the tributary.

The Tampa Bay Times does not provide a link the the op-ed.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

jim.tatum@oursantaferiver.org

*– A river is like a life: once taken,
it cannot be brought back © Jim Tatum*

All boaters need a safety course

December 30, 2020

They can grow to 13 feet in length, reach weights in excess of 1,000 pounds and swim at speeds of 15 mph. But Florida's much-loved manatees have never been any match for the high speeds and quick turns of the thousands of power boats that ply virtually every corner of their natural habitats. Sadly, 2020 has proved to be no exception. A staggering 593 manatees died in 2020, an increase of more than two dozen over the most recent five-year average. The causes were varied, but at least 90 of the threatened sea mammals died after being struck by boats. That number is very likely higher because the state stopped doing necropsies for two months during the first wave of COVID-19 cases last spring. But there's no question that people continue to be a leading cause of manatee deaths, especially people piloting boats.

This year's troubling death toll is only the latest evidence that our state leaders must take commonsense steps to better ensure boaters are safely sharing waterways with this highly unique, threatened species that evolved from land mammals more than 60 million years ago.

Our waters aren't just dangerous for manatees: Florida leads the nation in annual boating fatalities. And the state's outdated, ineffective boater safety measures are clearly part of the problem.

Florida has nearly 1 million registered boats, and thousands of out-of-state tourists rent boats here. But boater safety education requirements currently only apply to boaters under 32 years old.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission statistics on the ages of the people involved in boating accidents dramatically spotlight the need to extend the minimum education requirement to all boaters. For example, in 2019 more than two-thirds of the people involved in boating accidents were age 36 or older. And 80% of the boat operators involved in a fatal accident had no formal boater education.

As the state's population increases and tourism picks back up, threats to both manatees and people will continue to escalate unless we make some much-needed changes. Fortunately, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission recognizes this critical gap in boater education and has proposed language for the 2021 legislative session to develop a comprehensive boater education program that applies to all operators regardless of age. Universal boater education is a critical component of any effort to improve public safety and reduce threats to wildlife on our waterways.

The commission has also drafted a rule proposed for adoption in February that will streamline the process for local governments to designate so-called boating restricted areas that limit boat speeds to better balance the conflict between recreation and safety.

Amid the ongoing pandemic and economic and social unrest it might seem easy to postpone efforts to put a plan in place to help slow the number of manatees killed by boats. But it would be extremely unwise. We don't have time to wait.

Floridians are deeply connected to the state's unique wildlife.

And you can bet the majority of residents agree our legislators should pass this simple but much-needed measure to help manatees and the rest of us safely navigate our crowded waterways.

Sarah Gledhill, a Florida native who grew up boating in Tampa Bay, is a senior field campaigner in Florida for the Center for Biological Diversity.

SARAH GLEDHILL



0