

Dear Ms Marshall and Mr DeGreef,

I am writing you because you were referenced in the e-mail that follows. I am a business owner and tour operator in Crystal River, Florida. I do not provide swim with the manatee programs, but am involved in manatee and other wildlife viewing tours. I was asked to support the King's Bay Management Plan that was referenced below, but when I asked for a copy, they told me they weren't interested in my support. I disagree with the many of the "facts" that are presented and there are others in our industry who do not appreciate the current invasive approach to these tours by many swim program operators. I e-mailed Mr. DeGreef last week, but have not received a response, nor have I yet been able to see the referenced plan, so my comments are based on what the letter contained. My comments are in **BOLD**.

I do support a strong enforceable management plan that accomplishes protection of the manatee by limiting physical contact as recommended by the City of Crystal River, the FWCC and NOAA/NMFS ([see letter attached](#)) and ultimately limits the number of swimmers in the water as well. Harassment must be better defined and enforced. The current guidelines from both USFWS and FWCC are adequate and good respectively. The problem is that the guidelines are not being followed and are not enforceable in and of themselves. Cumulative impact is being ignored. A single marginal act of harassment which may not reach the threshold for law enforcement action, when multiplied a dozen or more times a day, every day for 3 months has the potential to cause serious impacts. At the last stakeholders meeting USFWS and FWCC representatives clearly told the participants that guidelines were not the law. I believe that sent the wrong message.

I also find it odd that the author of the original letter who argues so strongly for the continuation of "tactile" interaction (read that as petting) uses the following quote on his web site: "*Those who wish to pet and baby wild animals "love" them. But those who respect their natures and wish to let them live normal lives, love them more.*" (Edwin Teale) I find the hypocrisy offensive and bordering on fraudulent.

Please see below for the original e-mail letter and my responses to their presentation.

If you would like any further information or to discuss the issue further, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

Respectfully,

Matthew A. Clemons, Owner
Aardvark's Florida Kayak Company
Crystal River, Florida
Certified EcoHeritage Tour Provider

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: Captain Mike <captainmike@sunshinerivertours.com>
To: info@floridakayakcompany.com
Sent: Thursday, October 25, 2007 10:25:39 AM
Subject: Fw: okay, try this....

Cordially,
Captain Mike

----- Original Message -----

From: [Sunshine River Tours](#)

To: [Captain Mike](#)

Sent: Wednesday, October 24, 2007 5:46 PM

Subject: okay, try this....

Dear Business Owner or Manager,

Recently the dive and snorkel tour operators of Citrus County have come under assault from well known political action groups in an attempt to halt swim interactions in this area with the Florida manatee. It is clear that there is a concerted effort underway to halt manatee swim interactions. Even the most ardent supporters of this position concede that individual manatees may seek out and enjoy the interaction, their claim is that these interactions are detrimental to the well-being of the manatee population. The science does not bear this out. Indeed all non-biased credible evidence is to the contrary. **This began as a discussion on harassment and most still believe that swim programs could continue if there was some give and take by the swim program industry. While not everyone promotes the swim with approach, they don't necessarily think it needs to end, only that the harassment must stop and the physical contact be curtailed. Whether they (manatees) like it or not is irrelevant. They also like being fed and that is clearly illegal. The core process here is acclimating (taming) an animal to approach humans. Wild animals that approach humans for whatever reason, are no longer wild animals and are ultimately at risk. The end result of the acclimation process is the same whether it be feeding (against the law) or petting (not against the law, but contrary to the guidelines for interaction) . There have been no studies (non-biased credible evidence) that this is not effecting breeding behavior or overall health of the Northwest Florida sub population. The Sorce study and others have noted a shift from feeding and resting to swimming when swimmers are present. By definition, this should constitute harassment. When you routinely hear tour operators encouraging their guests to "scratch their bellies", or "tickle them under the flipper or they'll leave.", it becomes apparent that there is little understanding or concern for the animals staying wild. Another common practice is trailing a "chewing" rope from the boat to attract manatees. None of these activities are enforced as harassment, yet meet the definition.**

The facts are:

(1) The Manatee population of the state is on a general increase to the point that a downgrade in their protection status from endangered to threatened species is being considered by the State of Florida .

Even FWCC doesn't make this claim. They have stated that there is no statistically (with variance) accurate estimate of overall population numbers. They further state that threats are expected to increase and may cause future declines in population. Only by the new definition are they no longer endangered. Note that IUCN just moved (in September 2007) Florida manatees to endangered from threatened. Quite the opposite of the state action and claims made in the "facts".

(2) Citrus County is the only place in the world where tactile swim interactions between humans and manatees is permitted and we have the largest, healthiest population of manatees in the state. *FWS State Biologist Jim Valade, March 21, 2007* **The Citrus County (Northwest) sub population only accounts for ~ 10% of overall population and there have been no comparative studies on how diver interaction effects health and vitality. In populations of other marine mammals that have been studied, the effects are negative. According to FWCC, swimming with manatees is not illegal. It is also occurring in other areas of the state albeit on a smaller scale. Note the emphasis on tactile interaction.**

(3) "...if swim interactions were detrimental to the manatee population we would be seeing deaths due to starvation & hypothermia from animals being driven out of sensitive habitat. That's not what we're seeing. The overwhelming majority of the manatee deaths in this area are due to vessel collisions." *Jim Kraus Refuge Manager of Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, March 21, 2007* (and many other subsequent occasions)

Gross mortality is a poor measure of evaluation and distracts from the real issue. It does not take into account the effects of behavioral changes or sub lethal stress.

(4) Citrus County has the largest population & concentration of manatees and has one of the lowest manatee mortality rates in the state. Compare these Florida Fish & Wildlife 2006 mortality Statistics for just a few counties:
Citrus 10 deaths
Brevard (Titusville-Cape Canaveral area) 87 deaths
Hillsborough (Tampa) 14 deaths
Monroe (FL Keys) 44 deaths
Volusia (Daytona) 22 deaths

Citrus County does not have the largest population of manatees. As previously stated we account for only ~10% of the overall population. Gross mortality is also a meaningless number unless it is put into perspective. All the other areas listed have much higher populations and more registered vessels.

A more useful number is per capita mortality. If you look at manatee population estimates vs human population or number of registered vessel Citrus actually ranks number one in mortality. Mortality trends also tell a different story. With only 3 quarters worth of data in, Citrus has 11 fatalities for 2007. For the period 1990 to 2000 the average annual death toll was 5.8 individuals. For the period 2000 to date, that average toll has climbed to 10. That's a significant proportional increase.

(5) The local dive & tour operators often get the blame for bad behavior occurring from rental & private vessels. When most dive operators supervise the behavior of those interacting with the manatee all agree the interaction is beneficial to both human and manatee. Tour operators are responsible for much of the education and support that manatee conservation efforts enjoy. It is not don't known if this is a coincidence or not but up until 1973 you could actually get a permit to hunt manatees in the state of Florida . At roughly the same time people started coming to the Crystal River Area to swim with manatees, hunting permits for manatees stopped being issued. Swim interactions in this area have been occurring for six generations of manatees. **While not solely to blame and while all are not as bad as some, it is hard not to put some of the blame on the dive operators when you routinely have captains instructing people to pet them and "scratch their bellies" . Not everyone agrees that interaction is beneficial to humans (except the operators bottom line) and certainly not to manatees. Also note that many of the dive and tour operators are the same business renting boats to unsupervised boaters. As for the correlation between hunting and swim programs..... it is ludicrous to infer any connection. Factually, while manatees may have been hunted here at one time, there were never any "permits issued" specifically to hunt manatees .**

(6) A 30% decrease in snorkel & dive tourism to this area could have a minimum of a \$50 million negative impact to the local economy.

There have been no studies completed to date to support any claims on economic impact. This is an imaginary number and should be treated as such. Whale watching and other wildlife viewing programs are conducted worldwide without a hands on or even a swim with component. The 2006 tourist tax data does not suggest anything anywhere near this magnitude. What this statement suggests is that allowing tourists to harass manatees at some level is ok as long as the income stream continues.

(7) The proposed **King's Bay Management Plan** presented to Governor Crist and Senator Nelson has been adopted by two of three largest tour operators in this area as well as several smaller ones. This proposal addresses many key issues and represents serious concessions by the operators in terms of voluntarily limiting access to certain parts of King's Bay. Included in the plan is a mechanism for private/public funding partnership and a vision for an educational program through the American Academy of Underwater Scientists and the Handicapped Scuba Association. **This is apparently a swim program industry sponsored plan developed with no input from anyone but that specific industry. I have requested a copy of plan from Sunshine River Tours and was told that they didn't want my support. I also question how the AAUS is involved. It is my understanding that they are primarily a diver organization that works with scientists to insure OSHA compliance. Unless everyone signs on (not just 2 out of 3) and some of the small operators, nothing will change.**

(8) Dive operators recently banded together and raised nearly \$6,000.00 towards education and full time law enforcement for this area. These funds will be donated to the Manatee Protection Fund instituted by the **Friends of Chassahowitzka**. Feel free to contact the Friends at fcnwr@atlantic.net or call (352) 563-2088 Ext 215. As a

business owner or manager you may wish to consider becoming a corporate sponsor for this worthy cause. **That's an admirable gesture. It's a usually a given that ecotour operators give back to protecting the resources they depend on, but to my knowledge this is the first time since inception of the swim programs that it has happened. The refuge manager also noted that it would cost at least \$100,000 to outfit a single officer. At least it's a start.**

Please show your elected officials that you support a management plan that addresses the three E's: **Education, Environmental Conservation & Economic Stability.** Your support is critical to insure that manatee swim interactions can continue in a reasonable manner. **I would support such a plan as long as (1) I can review it first, something I have been denied to this point, (2) The economics take a back seat to environmental ethics and responsibility, (3) The education part includes the ethics of interacting with wild animals, (4) The plan limits tactile interaction, (5) The plan addresses carrying capacity and cumulative impacts, (5) The plan addresses changing use patterns and manatee needs, and (6) The plan is mandatory and enforceable.**

Please Fax your support to the Office of Gov. Charlie Crist, Attn. Willem DeGreef **(850) 487-0801** and/or e-mail willem.degreef@myflorida.com

And please fax Sen. Bill Nelson, attn. Lisa Marshall **(407) 872-7165**

We can work together so that conservation, education and economic interests can develop into a symbiotic relationship for the highest good of the entire ecosystem of Crystal River . **It would be nice if they really meant this. The response from them when I requested a copy of the plan was they didn't want my support.**