MERMAIDS SIGHTED IN GALVESTON BAY

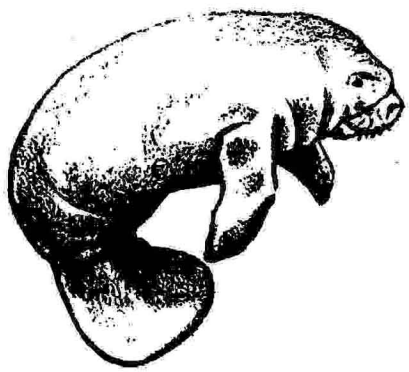
by Andrew Schiro and Dagmar Fertl

Editor's Note: As Soundings *was going to press, the manatee that had been "visiting" the warm water discharge far upstream in Buffalo Bayou had been captured and relocated to Sea World in San Antonio for genetic testing and observation before a planned release in its native habitat.*

After spotting mermaids off the coast of Haiti, Christopher Columbus wrote in his log, "They are not nearly as beautiful as painted." This was probably the first report by Europeans of manatees in the New World. Mix a long sea voyage, a lonely sailor, and a manatee, and one might see how we have the legends of mermaids and sirens. As a matter of fact, manatees are classified as Sirenians — taking the name after Homer's tales of mesmerizing sirens. These gentle, slow-moving, vegetarian mammals can reach sizes of up to 1,000 lbs and eight feet in length.

Ask anyone where manatees are found and they will tell you — Florida. But did you know that several have been seen in Texas waters this year—including Galveston Bay and Buffalo Bayou? Manatees are unusual along the Texas coast but not unknown.

At one time, manatees along the Gulf coast were not an uncommon sight. They were an easy and tasty meal (the meat reportedly tastes like pork) and in some areas were hunted extensively. Habitat loss in the form of coastal development added to their demise. The manatee is now one of the most endangered marine mammals in U.S. waters (the northern right whale is possibly in a more perilous situation), and is protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and the Endangered Species Act.



Near the beginning of the century, manatees were common enough in southern Texas that several were captured for public display. Since then, however, only sporadic strandings and sightings along the northern Gulf coast from northwestern Florida to south Texas have been reported. Stranded manatees may have died far away and were carried to shore by currents.

For the past five years, an increasing number of manatees has been reported in the northern Gulf of Mexico; in the last few months, we have seen a rise in reported sightings of manatees in the coastal waters off Texas and Louisiana. The following four accounts are among the most recent reports from Texas waters.

The first report came from San Luis Pass (at the west end of Galveston Island) and turned out to be a mother with her calf. The manatees were staying on the edge of a narrow channel and were observed occasionally poking their nostrils out of the water to breathe, then quickly disappearing below the surface. The pair was observed for several more days in that area and a local bait camp kept tabs on their location to direct boaters away from the animals. A week later, a manatee mother and calf were reported in several locations in west Galveston Bay and a few weeks later near the Galveston Causeway. We do not know whether all of these sightings were of the same pair.

In southern Texas, at the Port Mansfield jetties (about 40 miles north of South Padre Island), another mother and calf were seen for two days. This was only a week after the Galveston sighting and is most likely a second group. For the past several years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of manatees reported in the southern Laguna Madre.

The end of October was marked by the sighting of a single manatee in Corpus Christi Bay near Engelside. A scar just behind the head enabled identification of the animal. For three weeks, the same animal made almost daily showings around the bay and was even seen in the University of Texas boat basin in Port Aransas.

More recently, a single animal was sighted on the morning of November 27 at a City of Houston wastewater treatment plant at Buffalo Bayou and 69th Street. Manatees are very sensitive to cold water and this animal may have taken advantage of the warm water from the outfall. The manatee hovered in the area for more than a week, occasionally meandering off in search of food, and attracting much attention from the public and the news media.

Why the increase in the number of manatee sightings? One possible reason is that the unusual water conditions created by the many tropical storms and hurricanes this year may have brought the manatees from Florida or Mexico (yes, there are manatees in Mexico).

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Mermaids

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So how can we distinguish the Florida and Mexican manatees from each other, and from where did our "Texas" manatees come? Fifty to sixty percent of Florida manatees have recognizable scars on their back from collisions with boat propellers, whereas most of the Mexican animals appear to be relatively unscathed. The discovery of stranded manatees makes determination more reliable. Since Mexican and Florida manatee populations represent separate breeding populations, there are genetic and skull differences, and measurements of these help us identify the population from which they came. The current theory is that manatees found in Texas are from the Mexican population and those found east of the Mississippi River are from Florida. There is also the possibility that we have both populations represented in this area. Only time will tell...but the manatee may not have much time.

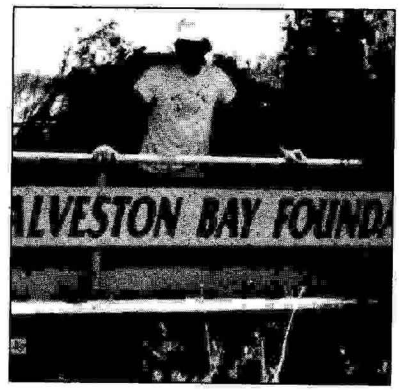
Recreational boats, fishing gear such as gill nets, and habitat loss continue to threaten manatees throughout their range. We share the waters with a host of wildlife that are no competition for a speeding boat or fishing gear. Remember, just as for other marine mammals that are protected by the MMPA, no harassment (swimming, petting, feeding, or close approach by boats) is allowed.

Andrew Schiro is a research assistant with the Marine Mammal Program at Texas A & M University at Galveston and a volunteer with the Texas Marine Mammal Stranding Network.

Dagmar Fertl is a biologist with the Minerals Management Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Interior. Dagmar studied bottlenose dolphins at the Marine Mammal Research Program at Texas A & M University at Galveston and received her Master's degree in 1994.

If you are interested in reading more about manatees, we suggest Manatees and Dugongs *by J.E. Reynolds III and D.K. Odell, published in 1991 by Facts on File.*

VOLUNTEER OF THE QUARTER (Fall, 1995)



Beginning with this issue, a new feature of *Soundings* is **Volunteer of the Quarter.** All GBF volunteers are valuable, hard-working and dedicated, but frequently we want to single out those who put in efforts above and beyond the call of duty.

Chris Thames is one such volunteer. Chris first appeared as a Bay Day volunteer, through his involvement with Houston Proud. While visiting the exhibit tents, he learned about GBF conservation activities, and signed up for cordgrass planting. Since then, Chris has been one of those people who seems to turn up every time there's work to do.

From July through September alone, Chris participated in at least 10 cordgrass plantings, completed Special Events Team training, and represented GBF at three festivals.

However, Chris is not new to estuaries and aquatic work. A native of Tampa, Florida, Chris tells us his mother supervised the mermaid performers at Weeki Wachee Springs. From the age of 12, Chris worked in the underwater maintenance department. His duties included moving the alligators out of the area before the "mermaid" underwater ballet performances! Although alligators have not been a problem on GBF cordgrass plantings, it's good to know Chris Thames is around in case we need him.

When he's not working on behalf of Galveston Bay, Chris is a senior systems engineer for Space Station Simulation.

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GALVESTON BAY FOUNDATION

SOUNDINGS

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NEW SHIP CHANNEL PLAN ADDRESSES COMMUNITY CONCERNS

by Linda R. Shead

It's been eight years since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers published reports on the impacts of its 1987 proposal to deepen and widen the Houston Ship Channel. During those eight years, the changes that have taken place in the design of the channel, the assessment of its impacts, and the evaluation process have been monumental. The Corps of Engineers and the Port of Houston Authority have been responsive to the many concerns raised by the Galveston Bay Foundation and others regarding the 1987 plan.

Based on the revisions in the project, the Galveston Bay Foundation does not oppose the current project to enlarge the channel and wholeheartedly endorses two key elements of the plan: the Interagency Coordination Team process and the beneficial uses for the disposal of dredge material.

Overall, the development of the new ship channel project represents a precedent-setting approach that could improve the quality of the Galveston Bay resource while supporting continued economic growth. The project thus has the potential to demonstrate the feasibility of sustainable development for this region, a concept which GBF supports.

The re-design and new documentation are the result of considerable effort to more thoroughly address the impacts of the proposed project. Following the near-universal criticism of the 1987 project proposal and evaluation documents, the Corps of Engineers formed an Interagency Coordination Team (ICT) in 1989.

The Houston Ship Channel bisects Galveston Bay from Bolivar roads to the mouth of Buffalo Bayou, and continues upstream to the Turning Basin.

As its name suggests, the group is composed of representatives of the four federal and four state agencies involved in review of major projects, plus the Galveston Bay National Estuary Program, along with the Corps of Engineers and the project's sponsors, the Port of Houston Authority and Port of Galveston. Several other entities served in an advisory capacity.

Six subcommittees of the ICT were formed to provide guidance during the intervening years for more than eight studies prepared for the re-evaluation of the environmental impacts of the project. Working as a group around a single table was a far cry from the historical process of the Corps doing the evaluation in isolation and then submitting their results for public and individual agency scrutiny and comment.

The ICT process had its benefits and its "price." A joint consensus process meant that many concerns could be addressed up front instead of through the adversarial steps that characterize the standard NEPA (National Environmental

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