

FEMA Allocates Funds for the Preservation of Manatees

Release Date: ?? 23, 2023

San Juan, Puerto Rico – In Puerto Rico, accidents with manatees are mostly caused by collisions with jet skis or motor and propeller boats, according to the director of the Manatee Conservation Center, Antonio Mignucci.

“We are noticing that people have not understood that they [manatees] share the environment with us and that we must give them that space. People with boats must understand that manatees live there and that they can’t move too fast. You must go slow near the coast, in the mangroves, in the estuaries. These are manatee areas and, in those parts, you have to go less than 5 miles per hour,” explained the Director.

As part of the efforts to increase awareness of manatees and their preservation, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) granted funds to the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) to install signs that alert the public when they are near these marine animals.

A total of 170 signs will be placed near boat ramps around the island’s shoreline to alert of the presence of manatees in the area’s waters. The signs display information about manatee biology and behavior; and explain what boaters should anticipate and do when in the vicinity of these herbivorous animals.

“The coasts of the island are for the public’s enjoyment and that goes hand in hand with our responsibility to preserve them and preserve their animals and habitats. Manatees are an endangered species, protected by state and federal laws. Knowing our duties when encountering them is very important, so these signs are necessary to alert visitors and prevent them from taking any action that harms them,” explained Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator José Baquero.

Interactions considered as harassment of manatees are prohibited under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act and the New Puerto Rico Wildlife Act; failure to comply with these laws can result in fines of up to



\$100,000 or one year in prison.

The funds allocated by FEMA will serve to install the signs around the north coast, which includes Isabela, Camuy, Barceloneta, Manatí, Vega Baja, Vega Alta, Dorado, Toa Baja, Cataño, San Juan, Carolina to Loíza; the east and southeast coast from Río Grande, Luquillo, Fajardo, Ceiba, Naguabo, Humacao, Yabucoa to Maunabo; and the south coast from Patillas, Arroyo, Guayama, Salinas to Santa Isabel. The award of over \$120,000 for the signs includes mitigation measures to secure and reinforce them.

For its part, the local government also develops initiatives to rescue manatees and address any activity that puts them at risk. The DNER secretary, Anaís Rodríguez Vega, informed that the Department recently completed a study in the areas of greatest manatee conservation to document their behavior in the presence of boats and to install or relocate more floats or markers to warn of their presence; as well as to design other conservation strategies, if necessary.

Other DNER initiatives include training for teachers, law enforcement and emergency management agents; educational roundtables and talks with students; and the distribution of stickers for kayaks in areas where manatee harassment has been reported.

“All of these opportunities to educate and enlist the support of boaters are invaluable, as boat strikes are the number one killer of manatees. Manatees can be considered sentinel species that let us know how our marine ecosystems are doing. The actions we take to preserve them will result in healthy marine ecosystems. Furthermore, they are a conservation icon that helps us raise awareness of how important it is to protect these species to maintain a diverse world,” said Rodríguez Vega.

Meanwhile, Manuel A. Laboy Rivera, executive director of the Central Office for Recovery, Reconstruction and Resiliency (COR3), said: “Recognizing the importance of this reconstruction project, the COR3 team will assist the DNER in the technical procedures required for this work to install these signs in the coastal municipalities to safeguard the life and preservation of manatees, an endangered species.”



Some recommendations from the Caribbean Manatee Conservation Center when running into manatees is that it is important to look at them without touching them; and to avoid interrupting their habitat or altering their natural feeding patterns.

By chasing, touching, feeding and watering a manatee, people alter the mammal's behavior in its natural environment. If the manatee is frightened, it may move away from its favorite places to feed itself, drink fresh water or rest. The Center also advises against diving or swimming near manatees, as the cubs could die if separated from their mothers.

People who come across an injured manatee should immediately call the DNER Vigilant Corps at 787 724 5700; by only posting the information on social networks, the rescue response could be delayed.

To date, FEMA has awarded over \$30.6 billion for over 10,700 Public Assistance projects aimed at rebuilding a more resilient Puerto Rico.

For more information about Puerto Rico's recovery, visit fema.gov/disaster/4339, fema.gov/disaster/4473 and recovery.pr. Follow us on our social media at Facebook.com/FEMAPuertoRico, Facebook.com/COR3pr and Twitter @COR3pr.

