

MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION
4340 EAST-WEST HIGHWAY, ROOM 905
BETHESDA, MD 20814

14 March 2007

Mr. Sam D. Hamilton
Regional Director, Southeast Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1875 Century Boulevard, Suite 400
Atlanta, GA 30345

Dear Mr. Hamilton:

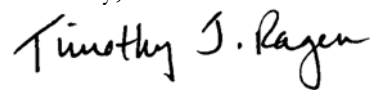
The Marine Mammal Commission recently viewed a video posted on the Internet by Tracy Colson that shows flagrant examples of manatee harassment by divers in King Bay, Florida (http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=starthrower&search=Search). The video shows divers grabbing, disturbing, chasing, kicking, riding, and surrounding resting manatees. We also saw a photo of a manatee at Crystal River that appears to have been sprayed with paint. As described in our letter of 1 December 2000 (enclosed), we believe such incidents reflect an ongoing problem that warrants greater attention by the Fish and Wildlife Service. In our view, such harassment may be directly linked to educational materials, including the Service's "Manatee Manners" video, which advises divers that it is acceptable to touch and 'play' with animals that approach them. As indicated in the enclosed letter, and as we stress here, the Marine Mammal Commission finds this advice inappropriate and inconsistent with acceptable standards for public viewing of endangered species. Such advice invites people to pursue or otherwise place themselves in a position that will maximize their chances of touching animals.

The Service's approach for addressing these kinds of interactions also is inconsistent with that of the National Marine Fisheries Service in its management of other marine mammals in the area. Such inconsistency sends mixed messages and may cause unnecessary confusion for the public.

On pages 10–12 of the enclosed letter, the Commission recommended that the Service review and revise its educational materials for divers to advise explicitly that touching manatees is not acceptable. The Marine Mammal Commission reiterates that recommendation here. The Commission also recommends that the Fish and Wildlife Service immediately develop and implement new regulations requiring divers to maintain a distance of at least 10 feet from manatees and to back away from any animal that approaches them. Because a 10-foot buffer may not be sufficient, the Service should monitor the effectiveness of the new regulations and extend the buffer if necessary to prevent harassment.

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding these recommendations or the attached letter.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Enclosure