



Save the Manatee Club

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Note: A PDF of the petition has been posted on Save the Manatee Club's website at http://www.savethemanatee.org/fwcc_petition.pdf

GROUPS PETITION FLORIDA ON BEHALF OF IMPERILED WILDLIFE

Today, conservation and animal welfare groups from Florida and around the nation, including The Humane Society of the United States, Defenders of Wildlife, In Defense of Animals, National Environmental Trust, Environmental Defense, Save the Manatee Club, Animal Welfare Institute, The Ocean Conservancy, the Florida Chapter of the Sierra Club, and the Sea Turtle Survival League, announced they were filing a legal petition with the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) urging the state to revise its imperiled species classification system. Using what the petitioners say is a flawed system, the FWC has already downlisted the red-cockaded woodpecker despite opposition from many scientists. If the current classification system is not changed, the groups fear that many of Florida's at-risk species, such as the manatee, northern right whale, Florida panther, and Florida black bear could suffer the same fate as the woodpecker, resulting in less protection and misleading the public into thinking these species have recovered.

Florida is rapidly being developed, increasing the threats to wildlife and making not only survival, but also the state's goal of endangered species recovery, an enormous and difficult challenge. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in five years Florida will surpass New York in population,

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making it the third most populous state in the nation.

In 1999 the FWC modified its classification system to incorporate the listing criteria of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), a world authority on endangered species, except for one critical difference, the groups say. Modifications were made in 2005 but the changes failed to fix the major flaw. The FWC did not properly align the IUCN's risk categories with the IUCN's category names and definitions. Therefore, the IUCN's "Critically Endangered" category became the FWC's "Endangered" category. The IUCN's "Endangered" category became FWC's "Threatened" category. The IUCN's third category of "Vulnerable," is considered the FWC's "Species of Special Concern." A species losing nearly 30% of its population over ten years probably would not even make it onto the "Species of Special Concern" list.

Until the FWC adopts a classification system that matches IUCN's or develops a new system that adequately protects wildlife from habitat loss, the groups want the state agency to delay any species' reclassifications that recommend a lesser status of imperilment.

Manatees, injured and killed by human activity each year - especially from boat strikes - are presently listed as "Endangered" under both federal and state law. However, after a state review was conducted using the present flawed classification system, the FWC is set to downlist manatees to "Threatened" status in June. State biologists have said the manatee population could decrease by half in the next 45 years from rising threats to its long-term survival. "If the FWC had actually adopted the IUCN's classification system, the manatee would continue to meet the criteria for 'Endangered' status," said Patrick Rose, Director of Government Relations for Save the Manatee Club.

The groups asked that the FWC's decision to uplist the gopher tortoise and other species whose risk of extinction is rising, not be delayed. "Since the gopher tortoise meets the exceedingly high threshold for upgrading in the state's current classification system, it is clearly in need of greater conservation attention," said Laurie Macdonald, Florida Director of Defenders of Wildlife. "The tortoises' upland habitat is quickly being converted to development around the state. Thousands of tortoises have been entombed below ground as subdivisions and shopping malls cover them over."

As an example of one of the criteria, under the current classification system a species would have to undergo, or be at risk of undergoing, at least an 80% decline in its population in order to be listed as "Endangered." "For slow-maturing species, such as sea turtles that take up to 35 years to reach

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reproductive age, recovering a population that has declined by 80% would be extremely difficult.

Animals such as these warrant full protection long before an arbitrary 80% threshold is reached; by then the situation would be critical, and saving species in emergency situations is nearly impossible,” said David Godfrey, Executive Director of the Sea Turtle Survival League.

The classification system was created to guide the management efforts of the state in order to conserve and recover imperiled species. “As species like the manatee are reclassified to a less imperiled status before their populations have actually recovered, state funding for research, management, and law enforcement will likely be directed elsewhere, preventing full recovery,” said Martha Collins, attorney for the groups. “Many of Florida’s species will be downlisted or even delisted, not because their biological status has changed, but simply because the listing criteria used by the FWC has changed. All we are asking through our Petition is for the FWC to reconsider their listing criteria and afford Florida’s imperiled species the proper protections they deserve.”

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The following are the organizations that signed onto the petition:

- Tropical Audubon Society
- The Pegasus Foundation
- The Ocean Conservancy
- Sea Turtle Survival League
- Save the Manatee Club
- National Environmental Trust
- In Defense of Animals
- Human Society of the United States/Humane Society International
- Florida Public Interest Research Group
- Florida Keys Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America
- Florida Chapter of the Sierra Club
- Environmental Confederation of South West Florida
- Environmental Defense
- Edgewater Citizen’s Alliance for Responsible Development, Inc.
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Audubon Society of the Everglades
- Animal Welfare Institute