



November 25, 2024

Nikki Colangelo
Acting Classification and Recovery Division Manager
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Florida Ecological Services Field Office
777 37th Street, Suite D-101
Vero Beach, FL 32960
Nikki.Colangelo@fws.gov

RE: Critical Habitat Designations for Florida Manatee and Antillean Manatee

Dear Ms. Colangelo,

The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation is an organization dedicated to protecting and caring for southwest Florida's coastal ecosystems. As a barrier island community, we understand that our environment, our economy, and our way of life are all closely interconnected and the health of the marine species that surround our islands are excellent indicators of the overall health of our local ecosystems. We have seen the pressures facing manatees over the past few years. As they face increasing pressure from crowded water ways, ailing water quality, changing ocean conditions and large seagrass die-offs, it is apparent that they need further protections. We fully support the proposed rule to add over 1.1 million acres of critical habitat for the manatee.

We at SCCF have seen firsthand the impacts that explosive growth and development has had on the water quality of southwest Florida, and the resulting degradation of seagrass. We encourage the expansion of critical habitat designations as a critical step to support the healthy ecosystems that are essential to the conservation of the species. We are in strong support of the proposed rule, specifically as it results to the expansion of critical habitat from Venice to Estero Bay. Pressures from unchecked growth in Southwest Florida continue to threaten the Manatee's existing habitat, including a recent state proposal to shrink the boundaries of the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve with detrimental impacts to the Manatee habitat that the preserve was designed to protect. By enshrine additional areas with a critical habitat designation, you will be creating an additional tool to help us protect this keystone species.

The economies of Southwest Florida are driven by the \$3.5 billion tourism industry, with the Manatee as the primary symbol of our water-based communities. Further expansion of the protections surrounding this charismatic animal would help bolster our local economies and support the communities that live, work, and play in Southwest Florida.

The manatee is an important animal to Southwest Florida, and by expanding protections to the proposed critical habitat designations you will be supporting our marine environments and the interconnected ecosystems that we all call home.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matt DePaolis', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Matt DePaolis
Environmental Policy Director