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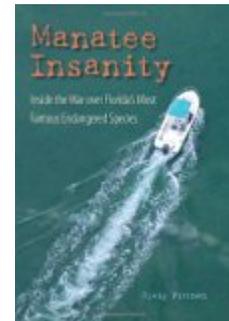
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Craig Pittman. *Manatee Insanity: Inside the War over Florida's Most Famous Endangered Species*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. x + 444 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3462-1.

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Extinct is Forever—Unless You're Delisted

Within the past twenty-five years, the manatee has become to Florida what the panda is to China—the cute, cuddly anthropomorphic symbol of the area's unique wildlife and a rallying point for the protection of an ecosystem endangered by rampant economic growth. Seen on specialty Florida license plates and in many elementary school classrooms, the image of the placid “sea cow” has become almost as ubiquitous as orange trees, Disney World, and South Beach as the symbol of the Sunshine State. Yet Craig Pittman, a journalist for the *St. Petersburg Times* who covers environmental issues for the paper, has given readers another and very different view of the manatee—as the centerpiece of a struggle over the very future of Florida itself. Pittman paints a colorful, and at times disturbing, picture of the battle over the manatee's place in Florida; as he casts developers, boaters, and property rights advocates against environmentalists, scientists, and nature lovers, with the manatee squarely in the middle. The fight over the manatee is more than simply a dispute over protecting an animal with no known enemy except humanity. For Pittman, the struggle represents two very different visions of the Florida dream—one designed around low taxes, little government interference in daily lives, and unbridled growth; the other around protecting and nurturing the environment that has made Florida such a unique and desirable place to live.

Pittman catalogs the history of human-manatee interaction in Florida from the first manatee protection law

in 1893 to the pitched battles over the listing (or delisting) of the manatee as an “endangered species” in the first decade of the twenty-first century. He focuses on the relationship between the numerous inexact scientific studies of the numbers of manatees that inhabit Florida waters and the need for increased government regulation to protect the slow-moving sea creatures. With the development of outboard motors and explosion of pleasure craft crowding Florida's waters, manatee numbers began to decline rather precipitously. As Pittman concludes, “by the 1940s, Florida's proliferation of fast-moving motorboats had begun forcefully intersecting with its slow-moving manatees” (p. 27). When power boats began colliding with manatees in greater numbers, more and more of the mammals began to show scars of these interactions with boat propellers. In 1955, Joe Moore, a field biologist at Everglades National Park, developed a system to use the scarring patterns on manatees to individually identify them. This methodology profoundly reshaped the study of manatees. “Fifty years later, state and federal wildlife biologists are still using prop-scar patterns to identify manatees for study” (p. 29).

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the confluence of a changing worldview, the first real detailed scientific studies, and positive television publicity combined to provide genuine hope that manatees were not on the fast track to extinction. For a fleeting moment “increased concern about the environment was now sweeping the country” (p. 71). Bipartisan federal support pushed through a host

of laws designed to protect the earth and its creatures from the destructive impulses of humanity. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality were established. The National Environmental Policy Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act were passed—as was the Endangered Species Act. Among the seventy-eight species categorized as endangered on the first federal listing was the manatee. Increased scientific studies of manatees showed the dire situation of the marine mammal and the need for continued governmental intervention on behalf of them. Federal and state officials worked to both preserve manatee habitat and to decrease the number of destructive boat collisions (in 1978, officials set the number of manatees killed by boats at twenty-one, although the actual number was probably significantly higher). Finally, a 1971 television special aired as part of *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* raised American consciousness about the manatee. Approximately forty million Americans saw the show, making them “aware that Florida was home to a strange creature called a manatee and it was being slaughtered by careless boaters” (p. 47). The Florida legislature even declared the manatee the state’s official marine mammal and passed laws making it a crime to kill or harass the creatures, and set boating speed limits to protect manatees.

With legal protections in place, government officials now faced the onerous task of implementing them. Pittman is at his best describing the various forces pushing for either increasing manatee protection or rolling it back. Caught in the middle were scientists trying to determine the efficacy of the regulations and their effects on manatee populations. Over almost a forty-year period, dozens of reports by federal and state wildlife biologists investigated how boating restrictions, habitat protections, and zoning changes affected the number of manatees in state waters—often with widely varying results. By the early 1980s, the environmental moment had passed and a more conservative mood took over the country. Exemplified by Ronald Reagan and his cowboy interior secretary James Watt, these individuals did not trust government and viewed scientists working with manatees as intrusive agents of a larger conspiracy. Organized into groups like Citizens for Responsible Boating, they called manatee supporters purveyors of “extreme enviro-nazi-ism, because to regulators businesses don’t matter, people don’t matter, manatees matter” (p. 110). But manatees still had significant support throughout the state. In 1981, advocates established the Save the Manatee Committee (still operating today as the Save

the Manatee Club). Organized by the strange duo of “Margaritaville” troubadour Jimmy Buffett and Governor Bob Graham, the group quickly raised the public presence of the dire predicament of the manatee. In his descriptions of the interactions between the straight-laced governor and the hedonistic singer-songwriter, Pittman shows why his writing has won so many awards. As he concludes, “the pairing with Graham made Buffett seem respectable, while hooking up with Buffett made Graham seem hip, or at least less tightly wound” (p. 93). The Save the Manatee Club has remained the most visible and important advocacy group working to protect both manatees and their habitat. It has been hampered however by its bizarre organizational structure—part quasi-government agency, part environmental advocacy group. And in 1992, it was involved in a bitter internecine feud with the Florida Audubon Society. These struggles, plus an inability to accurately determine the number of manatees in Florida, reduced the effectiveness of the group and played into the hands of boating regulation opponents like Jim Kalvin. In 2000, Kalvin organized Standing Watch, a group funded by large anti-regulation organizations and determined to roll back manatee protection rules and legislation.

The tangle of federal, state, and county regulations, agencies, and programs seems mind-numbing as Pittman recounts meeting after meeting and rule after rule. Were manatees increasing or decreasing in number? Were regulations working? Was the increasing number of manatee deaths a good or bad sign (opponents of regulation maintained that large death numbers actually meant that there were larger numbers of manatees!)? Should manatees even be listed as endangered? Were they endangered or simply threatened (and what did those words really mean)? Using his considerable reporting and writing skills, Pittman manages to make the unending series of public confrontations seem coherent and even interesting. In December 2007, a long and contentious public meeting ended with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission agreeing to postpone a decision on the removal of the manatee from the endangered list. It was a decision that had as much to do with the image of the manatee as anything else. Both sides agreed the manatee had become more than simply another threatened species. A Save the Manatee Club lawyer concluded, “The manatee is the face of Florida. It represents the animal that all our children love.” A Miami developer and lobbyist, who as a member of the commission pushed for fewer regulations, found common ground when he intoned, “the manatee is the icon for conservation in the

state of Florida” (pp. 360-361). Pittman ends the book on this ambivalent note. Almost everyone can agree that manatees are something special and symbolic of Florida’s unique environment. Whether that translates into long-term protection remains an open question.

This is an important book. Breezy, conversational, and full of the personal descriptions that are a hallmark of Pittman’s writing, it can easily be dismissed as a “beach read.” Though there is nothing wrong with those types of books, they are not usually reviewed by academics for academics. But while *Manatee Insanity*, catchy title and all, is enjoyable to read and not burdened by the discursive arguments that often mark academic works, it does offer much to those seeking to understand contemporary Florida. Pittman uses the controversy over manatee protection to discuss broader issues in Florida

politics and culture. It is not hard to see the beginnings of support for the programs endorsed by Governor Rick Scott in the issues raised by those opposed to manatee protection. In 2002, a realtor complained about the existence of federal manatee regulations. “We’re tired of the federal government telling us how to live; we’re tired of court’s rulings telling us how to live” (p. 241). The battles today being fought over the place of government in the lives of Florida citizens had their roots in the battles over whether federal and state governments have the right to regulate human endeavors in order to protect an ungainly and slow-moving marine mammal. Craig Pittman is on to something here—*Manatee Insanity* is much more than a description of the struggle over the survival of the manatee. It is a depiction of a much larger struggle—one for the very soul of the place we call Florida.

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