

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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THREATENED STATUS PROPOSED FOR WEST AFRICAN MANATEE

The West African manatee (Trichechus senegalensis) has been proposed for listing as a threatened species.

This notice was published in the May 17, 1978, Federal Register.

If the West African manatee is listed as threatened, certain measures will go into effect that could benefit the species and result in its restoration.

Comments from the public are invited through July 17, 1978. Submit comments to Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

On November 18, 1977, the Service was petitioned by the Marine Mammal Commission to list the manatee. It is the Service's opinion that the Commission provided sufficient data to propose this species.

The West African manatee is known from the coastal waters and adjacent rivers along the West Coast of Africa from the mouth of the Senegal River southward to the mouth of the Cuanza River in Angola. Its range includes parts of the following countries: Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Upper Volta, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Cabinda, Zaire, and Angola. Its present range is thought to be comparable to its historic range.

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In at least one area, the Niger and Mekrou Rivers along the northern boundary of Benin (formerly Dahomey), the West African manatee has been exterminated by local hunting. Manatees are taken by guns and harpoons in Liberia and Sierra Leone where existing protective regulations are routinely ignored. Ritual hunting for manatees still takes place in Ghana. In Nigeria, the species has traditionally been hunted by use of grass-baited traps, a practice which continues there unrestrained despite legal prohibitions. Native hunting in Zaire and Angola, on the lower Congo, was said to be reducing the manatee population, and hunting continued as recently as 1952. For most areas, it seems fair to assume that subsistence hunting is or has been intense, and that many local stocks are depressed.

In addition to direct hunting by natives, other factors may be having a negative impact on the species. Manatees are susceptible to accidental drowning in fish nets, particularly those set for sharks.

The West African manatee is currently protected under the African Convention for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. However, enforcement of this convention is reported to be ineffective. Some forms of additional legal protection exist in most countries where the West African manatee occurs, but the problems of enforcement and education are seemingly universal. The presence of the species in reserves gives some guarantee of protection. The West African manatee is sought for the high value of the meat which may have been an irresistible incentive for killing.

The West African manatee is already protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Among other things, that Act imposes significant restrictions on importation of the species in the United States. Listing the manatee as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act would not only provide an additional prohibition against importation but would also restrict transportation on sale in interstate or foreign commerce. Under each Act, permits are available in certain instances for scientific and zoological display purposes.

Listing of the West African manatee as threatened would allow the United States to try to: (1) make the countries in which it is resident aware of the importance of manatee protection; (2) make available to scientists of other countries the results of manatee research undertaken under U.S. sponsorship in such form as to be helpful to them in developing their own research plans; (3) encourage other countries to undertake comprehensive surveys of the status and distribution of this species; (4) encourage other countries to establish reserves; (5) encourage reintroductions to areas once they are well established as protected habitat; and (6) encourage the acquisition of study specimens that might not otherwise be available for purposes of scientific research, such as animals taken incidental to net fisheries.