

Can this fish save our bay from freshwater pollution?

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Photo by David Iliff

You are looking at a smalltooth sawfish, an endangered species that finds its home in the waters of south and southwest Florida. And that endangered status may be the key to protecting Sanibel's waterways against the pollution of freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee.

More on that in a moment, but first some background on this exotic looking fish and its predicament, based on research by the Environment Committee of The Committee of the Islands....

The smalltooth sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*), along with sharks, rays and skates, belongs to a group of fish called elasmobranchs, whose skeletons are made of cartilage. The sawfish is actually a modified ray with a flattened shark-shaped body and a flat, toothed rostrum or saw with 22-32 pairs of small sharp teeth. The saw measures a quarter of the length of the fish's body. It is covered with motion-sensitive pores that allow the sawfish, in murky water, to detect the movements and even the heartbeats of prey. It will grub on the bottom to uncover small crustaceans, crabs, shrimp, and fish.

Little is known about the life history and reproductive behavior of this fish, but females are known to give birth to 15-20 live pups. The saws of the newborns are sheathed and malleable at birth for protection. In Florida, newborn sawfish are about 2 feet long. It is believed males reach sexual maturity at 10-11 feet and females at 11-12 feet. They can grow to a length of 18 feet or more and live up to 25 or 30 years. Despite their fearsome appearance, the sawfish are gentle creatures unless provoked or surprised.

Numbers have declined by 95%

Hundreds of specimens of smalltooth sawfish have historically been reported throughout Florida. But because of their slow maturation rate, late reproductive cycle, loss of habitat due to coastal development, and decades of overfishing and gillnet

bycatch kill, their population numbers have declined dramatically, perhaps by 95% or more.

The sawfish eventually reached the point where it faced the possibility of extinction. That's why, in April, 2003, the U.S. population of the smalltooth sawfish was designated an endangered species by the National Marine Fisheries Service. This designation gives them federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Today the smalltooth sawfish is found regularly only in the shallow coastal waters, river mouths and sheltered estuarine habitats of south and southwest Florida. Therefore, to further protect the sawfish's existence, the National Marine Fisheries Service gave designation of critical habitat for the sawfish in September, 2009, under the Endangered Species Act. One of the two designated areas is The Charlotte Harbor Estuary, which includes all of the Caloosahatchee River up to the Franklin Lock and Dam and extends to the northern edge of Sanibel Island.

Government protection of critical habitat under the law is a good thing for our endangered local sawfish. How then can the same federal government, under the aegis of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, continue to use a lake release schedule that allows massive, turbid, estuary-killing torrents of polluted lake water to dump into federally protected sawfish habitat?

City Council asks the same question

Our City Council has essentially asked the same question. At Vice Mayor Mick Denham's request, City Attorney Ken Cuyler has contacted a Washington D.C. environmental law firm to evaluate whether designation of our waters as a protected habitat can help us prevent Lake Okeechobee releases that pollute those waters and destroy estuarine habitat.

The law firm advised the City as follows:

“...the designation presents the City with a valuable opportunity to influence the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' decision-making process to the benefit of the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary. In particular, it offers the City several options to renew its efforts to protect the Caloosahatchee from the damaging effects of freshwater releases associated with the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule.”

They offered options and plans of action for consideration. The City Council, at their June 1 meeting, agreed to proceed.

Sanibel's problem of dealing with the extreme amounts of polluted water released down the Caloosahatchee from Lake Okeechobee has been going on for far too many years. Let's hope this new tack finally produces the results we must have. In the meantime, keep the pressure on the Corps with your emails and phone calls to:

alfred.a.pantano@usace.army.mil or 1-800-291-9405.

You are also invited to send your comments and opinions to the Committee of the Islands. Visit our website at coti.org or email us at coti@coti.org.