Manatee Tour Guide Training

An industry which has both positive and negative impacts on manatees is tourism. While the positive aspect is achieved from public awareness and concern, some negative aspects include collisions with watercraft and harassment of manatees. The National Manatee Working Group has thus decided that to effectively protect manatees from the negative impacts of tourism, the training and certification of manatee guides is necessary. The BTB, Forest Department and CZMA&I working towards this shall prove to be a very effective way of helping the manatees and improving the specialized tour of manatee guiding.

The following is the initial concept of the Manatee Tour Guide Training, as was created in 1999. All manatee tour operators should be licensed as "Manatee Guides" and guidelines created as regulations. Tourists would be advised to book with only those guides who are licensed, to aid in our conservation efforts. When violated, offenders would be subject to penalties under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1981 and/or the Belize Tourist Board Regulations, 1992.

The following are recommended policy for tour guiding:

- Only guides with valid tour guide license from the BTB will be eligible for this specialty license.
- The BTB will be the certification and decertification agency (directly or indirectly) of licenses, with the collaboration of the. This will also include limiting the number of people certified for an area.
- Renewal of licenses with review sessions will take place periodically, possibly every two to three years.
- Certain areas will be designated as suitable swimming areas, based on physical and biological reasoning.
- At any time, tour guides will be responsible for taking out an official inspector on any of the tours. Periodic inspections should be made in order to ensure continued sound guiding.
- Installation of mooring buoys should be made at chosen sites for guiding. The best sites are those with clear water, however, manatees can be sighted almost anywhere in Belize. Popular manatee tour destinations such as in Southern Lagoon and around Swallow Cay and the Drowned Cays near Belize City would benefit from mooring buoys. Buoys or stakes in the water should be used for boats to tie on, as well as to demarcate areas of no entry.

Some guides from the following locations have participated in the preliminary training sessions: Cay Caulker, San Pedro, Belize City, Gales Point, Punta Gorda, and Placentia.