

ECOWATCH

A clarion call for the oceans

■ BY DELORES SAVAS

“If we wipe out all the fish, whales and sharks, the oceans are going to die. If the oceans die, we die. We can’t live on a planet with a dead ocean.”

Paul Watson, Sea Shepherd founder, environmentalist, conservationist, and animal rights activist

The dire warning above of sea creatures dying continues to rise. In fact, the ongoing saga of the continuous decline of the Atlantic right whale has taken a back seat in the news recently. The latest to make headlines in Florida is the mystery of why the endangered smalltooth sawfish and other fish in the Florida Keys are spinning themselves to death.

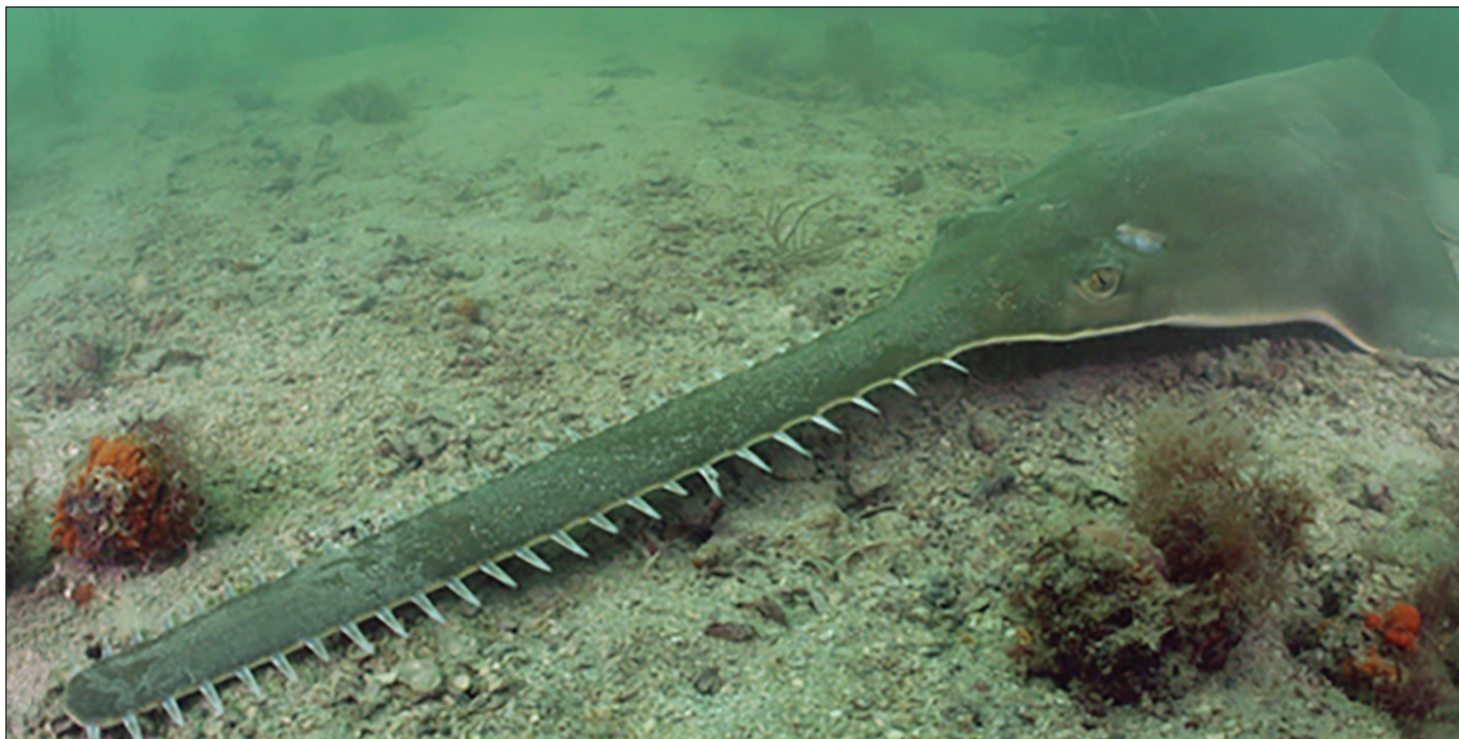
The Bonefish and Tarpon Trust has reported that it is not just sawfish:

“Reports of dying spinning fish have affected as many as 25 species of fish, including goliath grouper, tarpon, mullet, lemon sharks, and other large predatory fish, among the dozens of species of fish that have been affected by the whirling condition. It has not been determined as yet if the dead sawfish and the whirling symptoms in other fish are connected, but it is being looked into.”

“Currently, the cause is unknown. FWC continues to coordinate with partners to analyze samples. The FWC has also been documenting reports of abnormal fish behavior (spinning and whirling) in the Lower Keys.

The state is working with partners and stakeholders to investigate the behavior. At this time, the cause of the abnormal behavior is not known, and efforts to collect and analyze samples are ongoing,” the agency said.

There has been a host of speculation on the possible cause of this mystery as the FWC has sent 52 fish and 12 smalltooth sawfish to the University of South Alabama for analyses. And according to UF IFAS, 28 endangered sawfish mortalities have been observed and confirmed by community members and local fishermen. It is suspected, according to FWC, that



since sawfish are negatively buoyant and thus unlikely to float after death, mortalities would be greater.

A report as to why sawfish and other fish are dying will take time to determine the reason for these sad occurrences. A follow-up report will be in Eco Watch.

According to the UF IFAS, unfortunately, due to coastal development (leading to habitat loss, water quality issues, and accidental fishing catch), the decline of sawfish numbers is so low they were listed under the Endangered Species Act in 2003. While sawfish and their habitats are afforded certain protections under the ESA, the Act cannot prevent their being affected by the current situation, the cause of which is unknown at this point.

It seems like other sea creatures are having a hard time surviving in Florida waters. Just recently on March 11, an endangered sperm whale died after beaching itself. Officials said the whale measured around 44 feet long and 70,000 lbs, died after becoming stranded on a sandbar off the coast of

Venice, Florida. The cause of its death will not be available for months; however, this stranding will join with the numbers of whales being stranded throughout the USA. Nearly two dozen whales have been washed up dead along the East Coast in recent months.

However, the North Atlantic right whale in Florida is one major problem right now as they continue to die due to speeding ships, ocean noise from energy explorations that interferes with their sonar abilities, which is interrupted by ocean drilling and development. Noise from these activities can interrupt the normal behavior of the right whale and interfere with their communication. It will also reduce their ability to detect and avoid predators and human hazards, navigations and identify physical surroundings, find food, and find mates. An update will follow on the well-being of this endangered whale as experts have said that the endangered North America Right whale is on its way out.

And this is the sad part of this article. We are killing the creatures of the

sea by ignoring the guidelines set forth to save them. Ships continue to speed in their habitats. All ships of the sea have radar; they could see if a whale, dolphins are in the way. They choose to ignore the law, and consequently, sea creatures have died and will continue to die. Our oceans are full of plastics throughout the world so much so that all fish have plastics in their bodies and we, in turn, eat the plastic fish. We pollute our lakes, rivers, gulf waters, with pesticides, herbicides, used medical garbage, run-offs, and so on and wonder why the creatures of the sea are dying. We are poisoning our oceans. There are approximately 320 right whales left, and we are responsible.

Now we have the dilemma of spinning sawfish and other creatures of the sea mysteriously dying; the results should be no surprise. Paul Watson was right on the ball when he said we cannot live on a planet with a dead ocean, and we are reaching that point every day.

To report sightings of healthy, sick, injured, or dead sawfish to Florida Fish and Wildlife, call the Sawfish Hotline. Include date, time, and location of the encounter, estimated length, water depth, and any other relevant details.

email: gaiasvigil@gmail.com

SAWFISH REPORT

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