

## Reminder about Cold Weather and Stressed Marine Life

by Bryan Fluech, Collier County Sea Grant Extension Agent



*Increasing numbers of dead snook and other fish are being reported around Southwest Florida as a result of the recent prolonged cold spell. Photo by Lynn Gledhill-submitted to the Naples Daily News*

Just as many of us in Southwest Florida are having a hard time dealing with the cooler than normal temperatures many species of marine life are also feeling the effects. Several popular sport fish species such as snook and tarpon are at the northern limits of their natural range and are not adapted to prolonged exposure to cold temperatures. For instances water temperatures below 58 degrees can be lethal to snook, and there have been many reports of coastal water temperatures in the low to mid forties in many parts of the region.

As a result, a growing number of dead and dying snook as well as other fish species including snapper, grouper, catfish, and baitfish are being reported throughout the region. If you encounter a fish that appears lethargic, it is best to leave it alone. They are already in a state of stress, and touching them or trying to revive them can make the situation worse.

Also, although it may be possible to catch a snook with your bare hands or a dip net because of their slowed condition, snook are out of season and are illegal to harvest regardless of their size or how easy they are to catch. If you witness someone illegally harvesting snook or any species you are encouraged to call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 1-888-404-FWCC. Keep in mind that even if you come across a dying fish that is legal to keep, it is never recommended to eat any fish that appears sick or is already dead (even if it appears fresh) due to elevated bacterial levels and associated health concerns.

Fish, however are not the only marine species that are succumbing to the recent cold weather events. Thousands of cold-stunned sea turtles have been rescued in recent days and there are increasing reports of manatees with cold-related injuries. Symptoms of a cold stressed manatee can include but are not limited to white skin around the face, flippers and tail and/or deep grooves on the underside from the animal using significant amounts of their fat stores in order to keep warm. Sea turtles tend to float listlessly in the water or wash onto shore when they are cold stressed. If any sea turtles or manatees you encounter exhibit these symptoms or are dead, you are urged to report it to the state's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 1-888-404-FWCC.

Keep in mind because of the cold weather, wildlife officials are busy responding to calls from around the state and may not be able to respond to your call as quickly as normal. If it is possible, keep an eye on the animal in question and document its condition as well as its location. The more specific information you can provide officials, the more prepared they will be in their rescue attempt.



*Manatees and other marine life such as sea turtles can quickly become disorientated and stressed when exposed to colder water temperatures for extended periods of time. You are encouraged to report any sick or dead marine animals to FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 1-800-404-FWCC.*

*Photo: University of Central Florida*