



Where I work Nataly Castelblanco Martínez

Photographed for *Nature* by
Humberto Bahena Basave.

The manatee in this photo is named Daniel. The picture was taken in Mexico's Guerrero Lagoon in July this year, as I was assessing a small bump on his head. Thankfully, he was fine. Daniel was rescued about 20 years ago, rehabilitated and released, but he continues to be very attached to people – behaving like a pet – which is really problematic for conservationists and ecologists like me.

That's because locals and tourists offer Daniel food and drinks that aren't part of his typical diet, or that could harm him by transmitting pathogens. And Daniel is a strong, playful animal, so he could injure people – or even put their lives at risk.

My colleagues and I are involved in an intensive campaign to help people understand that Daniel is not a pet. Manatees are such wonderful, intelligent and interesting creatures; we can love them without owning them.

There are three species of manatee. All of them are threatened, and one subspecies is endangered. Historically, manatees were hunted by many Indigenous civilizations in

the Americas. Now, they face habitat loss, and risk being struck by boats or entangled in fishing nets.

I'm working on a project in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve – an extensive area in Quintana Roo, the Mexican Caribbean state that also contains Guerrero Lagoon. The aim is to assess how boat collisions are affecting manatee populations. In the past ten years, we've had six reports of manatees being killed by boats, so we're concerned that these incidents will become more common as tourism continues to increase in the area.

After 25 years working with these animals, it still gives me chills to see a healthy manatee in the wild. We need to act fast to save our endangered wildlife. No matter what happens in terms of legislation, if people don't make their own decisions to care for these animals, it's going to be impossible for us to protect manatees and other threatened species.

Nataly Castelblanco Martínez is a researcher at the University of Quintana Roo in Chetumal, Mexico. **Interview by Nikki Forrester.**