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NOAA Increases Protection for Endangered Smalltooth Sawfish Habitat

NOAA Fisheries Service is designating 840,472 acres of 'critical habitat' for smalltooth sawfish along the southwest Florida coastline. Smalltooth sawfish were listed as endangered in 2003 after various commercial fisheries captured too many as bycatch, and coastal development destroyed much of the species' habitat.

This new rule becomes effective on October 2, 2009, and will require federal agencies to consult with NOAA Fisheries Service before they approve activities – such as dredging – that may adversely modify or destroy sawfish critical habitat. The rule does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area.

“Stronger protection for smalltooth sawfish habitat is crucial to their survival,” said Dr. Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service. “The areas designated as critical habitat are nursery grounds that provide a safe haven for young sawfish to grow and avoid predators. “

These areas are not protected under pre-existing laws. Because they are nursery grounds, they are essential to the conservation of the species and therefore warrant protection. These nurseries contain two features important to sawfish: red mangroves and waters with fluctuating salinity levels ranging in depths up to three feet. Protecting these features in the designated critical habitat will maximize the potential for population growth and recovery of the species.

The critical habitat area off southwest Florida is divided into two separate units between Charlotte Harbor and Florida Bay. The first unit covers 221,459 acres of coastal habitat within Charlotte Harbor, and the second covers 619,013 acres of coastal habitat in the Ten Thousand Islands and the Florida Everglades.

Smalltooth sawfish are tropical marine fish that are closely related to sharks, skates, and stingrays. The historic range of the smalltooth sawfish in the United States extends from Texas to New York – with the largest numbers found in south and southwest Florida from Charlotte Harbor to the Dry Tortugas. The species current range is peninsular Florida with most encounters reported from south and southwest Florida. Today, smalltooth sawfish are rarely encountered by fishermen, boaters, or scientists.

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources.