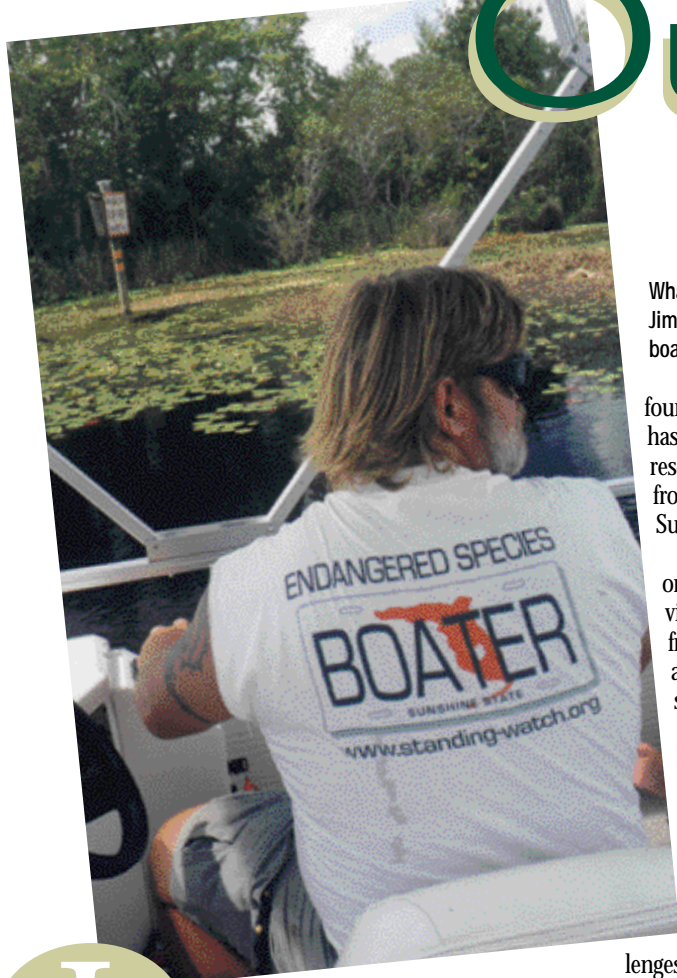


# Camped Out for a Cause



What's more endangered, animals or access to the water? Standing Watch President Jim Kalvin, at left, points to Florida's growing manatee population as evidence that boats and marine life can co-exist.

foundation grants, but which has tapped into a rising tide of resentment among boaters from all walks of life in the Sunshine State.

What this two-year-old organization does have is a vision of organizing boaters, from the grassroots up, into a politically potent force to safeguard access to the state's waterways.

This first-time event for Standing Watch, billed as a Leadership Summit, was meant to bring together activists to learn from each other and share local knowledge about challenges

to boater access and opportunities for membership expansion in all corners of the state.

Over the years, many others have tried to organize Florida's 750,000 boaters into an effective statewide voice, both from the top down and from the bottom up. But all these one-issue attempts have failed to achieve any staying power.

Standing Watch seems to be taking a different tack. In fact, a number of local boating advocacy groups have already folded their members into Standing Watch and become chapters of the organization.

So the upstart boaters' lobby, founded in 2000, is nearly statewide already and judging by the cross section of Florida boaters assembled this Indian Summer weekend, it's going to make even more waves than it already has to date.

## Galley Cabinet

"These people are my 'go-to' group," says Jim Kalvin, Standing Watch president and founder. A Naples, FL, marine contractor,

he says he's been put out of business twice by the overzealous application of endangered species laws.

"This isn't my board of directors," says Kalvin. "These are Standing Watch members from all around the state who I can call to get a read on an issue in their area.

"We've brought them together to meet each other and to talk about why the issue they may be facing at home is not a county issue, it's not a regional issue; it's a statewide issue," says Kalvin. "And that's the way we have to attack these issues — as a statewide force."

The group Kalvin has assembled — small business owners, white-collar professionals, several retirees from business, even a 'soccer mom' — have given up their weekend to travel to Florida's lush, watery midsection at their own expense. While there are a variety of issues at stake, all are here for the same reason: government regulation has run amuck, they say.

Some are old hands at this, like meeting host Rick Rawlins who co-owns Highland Park Fish Camp and in 1990 founded Citizens for Responsible Boating. The Volusia County-based organization grew to 500 members as it tried to prevent over regulation of boating for the sake of manatees.

Rawlins says zealous state and federal regulators, led around by "extreme environmentalists," ruined the once-booming business that he and his brother, Ron, inherited 40 years ago. In all that time, Rawlins says, he's never even seen a manatee in the waters that gave Highland Park its reputation for world-class largemouth bass fishing. But few customers these days will pay to ride for over an hour or more, each way, at dead-slow speed to reach the fish.

Others are recent arrivals in the field of grassroots organizing, like Doug Metko who owns a marine metal fabrication business in

**I**f the alligator skull the size of a five-gallon bucket on the porch doesn't tip you off that this is no ordinary conference facility, the two mounted bobcats, a dozen deer heads and at least 26 trophy largemouth bass on the walls should leave no doubt. The Highland Park Fish Camp, in DeLand, FL, does not require a coat and tie.

No sir, the average well-heeled non-profit organization wouldn't hole up in a place like this for a planning retreat. For one thing, the only conference room is the great outdoors — under a sun awning or around a campfire. With the conferees bunking in cabins or camping trailers, you couldn't get farther from the conference hotel scene of Orlando or Miami Beach.

So what attracted a group of boating advocates and grassroots organizers to this neck of the woods in late September? The opportunity to get in on the ground floor of Standing Watch, Inc., a bare-bones boaters' advocacy group, with no paid staff and no big

the Tampa Bay area. In response to new and, he says, unwarranted state restrictions on boater access to popular sandbars, Metko founded SOS — Save Our Sandbars. With just over nine months and more spare-time hours than Metko cares to count behind the organization, SOS has raised local boaters' consciousness to the tune of 300 members and \$25,000, getting the word out through aggressive application of the Internet and e-mail technology.

A few are newcomers to grassroots activism, like Lisa Neal of Titusville near Cape Canaveral. A lifetime of water skiing came to a screeching halt when the state closed all of her family's favorite spots on the Indian River.

### We're From the Government and We're Here to Help

"I saw a notice in the paper from the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission asking for input on how they could rework the manatee zones in Brevard County," says Neal, a mother of four wake boarding, water skiing teenagers who also coaches a soccer team.

"Naïve me, I'm thinking they want to work with the public to make the river more user friendly for manatees and boaters," she explains. "So I attended the meeting, with only about five or six other members of the public in the room, and gave the commission-

atee zones.

"Mind you, we've had manatee zones for a dozen years here and the population just keeps increasing," Neal adds.

That comeuppance got Neal angry and, more to the point, involved. She spoke up for boaters at commission hearings from Tallahassee to Palm Beach, but soon realized she would have to be part of a larger squeaky wheel to be heard.

"At the hearings, I began to notice that people representing groups got to speak first and individuals like me went to the back of the line," she reports. "That's when I joined Standing Watch, since I felt they were representing all boaters and they could speak for me and my family, too."

Neal and every other person at the Leadership Summit agreed — no matter what type of boating they enjoy — that everyone must "get on the same page" because one's right to access the waterways is being challenged on every front.

### Endangered Boaters?

"It's not just about manatees," says Calvin. "It's the piping plover, it's the snowy



Frustration with government "over-regulation" brought a group of boaters from across Florida to share their vision for building a strong statewide grassroots lobby.

There can be no doubt, however, that it is the manatee — and the new round of regulations on boating now in play around the state — that has built Standing Watch so quickly to 5,000 dues-paying members with another 15,000 boaters in affiliated groups.

But is this organization "anti-manatee" as it's often labeled in the soundbite world of today's popular press? Absolutely not, says Claudia Allbright, a boater from the Clearwater area on the Gulf coast.

"The majority of boaters are just as fascinated with this gentle animal as any child and we would all do anything to avoid hurting them," Allbright says.

"But we feel that so many avenues of protection could be implemented effectively before resorting to the elimination of boaters' access to the waterways and that, unfortunately, is not what is being done," she says.

What also irks boaters and continues to drive them to join Standing Watch is the self-righteous attitude of environmental groups that push for more regulations, Calvin says.

"It's particularly frustrating because most of the members of these groups, although well meaning perhaps, don't live or boat in Florida and don't understand the issues here," he added.

"The groups we're up against are well-funded by donations from large corporations and grants from national foundations with very deep pockets," Calvin claims. "They have the money for high-powered lawyers who can manipulate the system, particularly the endangered species laws, to impose their concept of how our environment should be managed."

But Calvin and those gathered at the Standing Watch Leadership Summit are betting that local boaters and voters, organized for grassroots action, will soon turn the tide. ■

— By Ryck Lydecker



Highland Park Fish Camp once had a waiting list for slips and dry stack spaces but now slow speed zones intended to protect manatees require over an hour's ride to reach the fish although locals say the animals aren't even found there.

ers a letter with all my great ideas for how to improve water skiing in my area."

But when the proposed rules came out, Neal says, not only did the commission ignore her ideas, every place where she'd water skied for years would be closed as slow speed man-

egret, it's 'fill in the blank.' The issue is the abuse of regulatory power that results in the over-regulation of natural resources, closing public lands and waters, and usurping property rights, all in the name of the Endangered Species Act."