

SURGERY FOR GULL GULL READIED FOR SURGERY



Kelly Grinter, director of Marathon Wild Bird Rescue and Hospital, prepares a laughing gull for surgery Thursday. The bird, which recently was found with a

broken wing at Curry Point Hammock, will have a plastic pin permanently implanted in its wing. The gull is expected to fly again.

LISA FUSS/HERALD STAFF

Agency to review plan for Tortugas

BY LISA FUSS
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State officials considering today whether to endorse a massive no-fishing zone in the Dry Tortugas will weigh some 4,000 public comments supporting and admonishing the plan.

Those comments came during a two-month period of public hearings. Although the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission isn't expected to take any formal action until its November meeting, commission staff is expected to make a recommendation of support today, said Billy Causey, superintendent of Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Several steps remain before the Tortugas reserve can be adopted, including approval by the commission, which concludes its bimonthly meeting today in De Land with review of the plan. The agency has jurisdiction over state waters in the area 70 miles west of Key West and more than 140 miles from Florida's mainland.

Two months ago, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council gave its approval to close 74 square miles of the 151-square-mile proposed reserve that lies in its federal jurisdiction.

The proposal, which would establish a Tortugas Ecological Reserve, would create "no-take" zones in the areas called Tortugas North and Tortugas South. It would also expand the boundaries of Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary by 96 square nautical miles to include two critical coral reef areas known as Sherwood Forest and Riley's Hump.

Known for its abundant sea life, including lobsters and colorful reef fish, the Tortugas not only boast the richest coral content and healthiest coral in the sanctuary, but the highest water quality because of its isolation. Waters of both the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico pass through the Tortugas region, making a productive and diverse marine area.

Mark Robson, the commission's South Florida regional director and Tortugas liaison, was unavailable for comment.

Should the commission sign off on the project, however, the sanctuary must clear one more hurdle: Gov. Jeb Bush and the state Cabinet must give final approval.

Causey said he believes the plan will come to fruition by year's end.

"I have a great deal of confidence in the entire process," said Causey, who touts the project as the only means to protect one of the last unspoiled marine habitats in the United States. "The science itself sells this plan, and I think people understand that."

Of the 4,063 people who responded during the 60-day public comment period that concluded in July, 3,812 of them supported the plan. Only 228 people — mostly commercial fishermen and diving operators — blasted the proposal, and 23 respondents said they were neutral.