

OUR TROPICAL SIRENS

DUGONGS

Dugongs belong to a group of plant-eating (herbivorous) aquatic mammals popularly known as sea-cows or sirenians. The nearest land-dwelling relative include elephants.

Their placid disposition, slow movement, nearshore distribution and relatively poor hearing have made sirenians vulnerable to exploitation. In the tropics, explorers and adventurers relied on sea-cows as sources of food.

Other terms given to the dugong, mainly by seafarers, are 'bride of the sea', 'mermaid' and 'sea pig'.

Most adults are 2.4 - 3.0 m long and weigh 250 - 420 kg and there is little distinguishing features difference between males and females.

Dugongs are pale at birth and darken to pale grey-brown with age. Older animals frequently have blotches of unpigmented skin on their back.

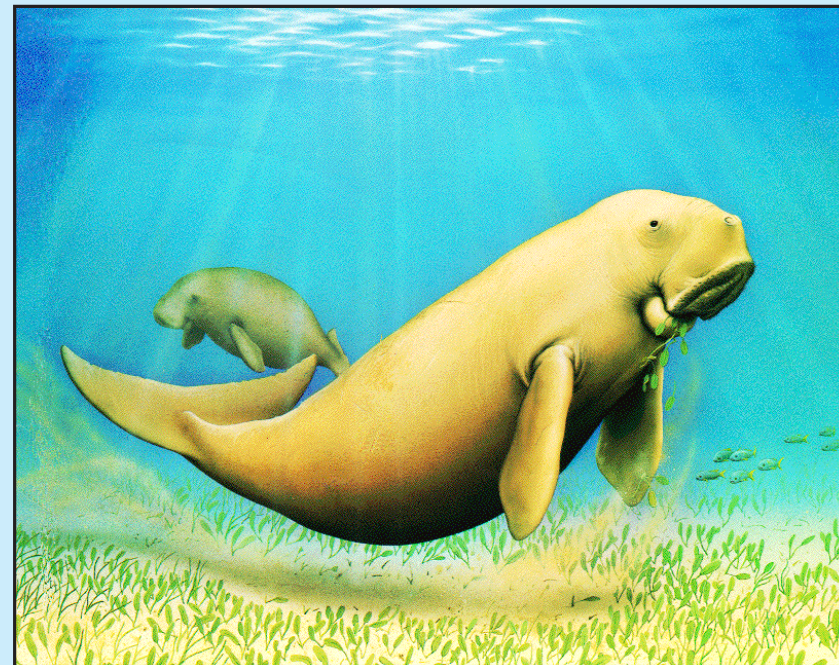
Most dugongs are found in calm, sheltered water 2 to 6m deep although they can feed in seagrass beds as deep as 20 m.

Dugongs have been exploited for various uses: dugong oil is believed to have medicinal and cosmetic properties. The hide is used for making sandals in some countries. Bones and tusks are used as knife handles, cigarette holders, necklaces and bracelets. Dugong tusk and powdered bone are used as aphrodisiacs in Indonesia. Dugongs have also been used as a source of food for traditional fishermen, and the meat tastes like veal or beef.

Dugongs inhabit the tropical and sub-tropical waters of northern Australia and Papua New Guinea. They are occasionally sighted wallowing in the warm shallow bays around Varanus Island and are also found around the Montebello Islands. Generally slow swimming, dugongs can reach speeds of up to 20 km/h when necessary.

They are good long distance swimmers and have been recorded to cover 100 km in a day.

Dugongs usually spend only seconds at the surface, breathing through their valve-nostrils between dives that average around 1 - 2 minutes. They generally do not stay submerged for more than eight 8 and dive to a maximum depth of 20 m. Dugongs may live to 70 years or more, growing to a maximum of about 3.0 meters and weighing up to 420 kg.



Breeding

Females cannot breed until they are at least 10 years old, some as old as 15 - 17 years and then she bears a single calf every 3-7 years after a gestation of about 18 months. new born calves are just over a meter in length and weight about 30 kg. Although calves start eating seagrass soon after birth, they will continue suckling milk up to 15 months old. Calving season is August through January which coincides with the seagrass regeneration after the winter decline.

Predators

Predators of the dugong include sharks, killer whales and traditional fisherman who regard them as an important food source. Traditional fisherman, including Australian Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and Papua New Guineans now hunt dugongs in aluminum dingies that have replaced the traditional bark canoe. Traditional fishing catches have, however, dwindled in recent years. In the early part of this century dugongs were hunted by Europeans for meat and oil which is thought to have some pharmaceutical properties. By far the greatest threat to Australia's dugongs are accidental deaths and drowning in fishing nets as well as collisions with water craft. Also high on the list of threats to dugong populations is pollution and contamination of seagrass by sewage and industrial chemical release. Cyclones may also pose a danger to dugongs.

Food

There are about five species of marine plant that are generally referred to as seagrasses, growing in the shallow waters around Varanus Island which may provide food for dugongs. These tropical seagrasses do not grow in dense beds as do the more southern species such as those found in Cockburn Sound of Perth. They are, nonetheless, ecologically important and fairly extensively utilised by dugongs and other marine life. An adult dugong for instance, will consume 50 - 60 kg of seagrass a day. Dugongs may supplement their diet with algae which is very abundant in the waters around the Lowendal and Montebello Islands.

