

Publication:

Marine Mammal Milestones
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January, 2008

Docile Dugong

The name Dugong comes from the Malay word 'duyong' which means 'lady of the sea' or 'mermaid'. Dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) are marine mammals in the Order Sirenia, which are commonly referred to as sea cows. There are only four surviving species of sea cows, three manatees and one dugong species. Since manatees and dugongs are in the same order they share many characteristics of each other.

Dugongs are born a pale cream color but they darken with age to a deep gray. Their entire body is covered in short hairs and they have whiskers on their muzzles, like manatees. Their tails are fluke-like in shape (similar to a whale or dolphin), unlike the manatee, who has a paddle shaped tail. The tail is used for propulsion and the front flippers are used for balance and turning. Movements are described as slow and graceful, similar to a manatee. The size of a dugong is generally smaller than manatees in size and weight. The range in size from 2.4 m to 3 m (2.7 m to 4 m manatee) and weigh 231 kg to 499 kg (up to 907 kg manatee). A calf is about 100-120 cm and weighs about 20-35 kg at birth.

Dugong males and females are the same size and it can be difficult to determine sex just by looking at them, unless the female is pregnant or a calf is present. Sexual maturity is reached at about nine years of age for both males and females. Gestation is a little over a year long and single calves are the norm. Twins have been seen in the wild. Newborn calves cling to their mother's back for a ride to and from the surface. Young dugongs suckle beneath the mother in an inverted position. Lactation lasts about 18 months, but the calves have been seen eating grass as young as 3 months old. They will typically remain with mom for an additional year after being weaned.

The average lifespan of a dugong is about 70 years old, where as a wild manatee lives to about 30 years.

They have a rounded head with small eyes and a large snout. The nostrils are at the top of the snout, and like all marine mammals, they must surface to breath. Dugongs cannot hold their breath under water for very long; they average about 3 minutes.

An adult dugong will have a total of 10-14 teeth and a pair of tusks that are seen in adult males and some old females. They are aquatic herbivores that feed on sea grasses and algae. Remains of crabs have been found in stomach contents. Typically, feeding occurs in sea grass beds that are 1 to 5 m below the surface. Wear on the tusks and the remains of sea grass pastures suggest that some digging or rooting is part of the feeding process. When dugongs are eating they are seen shaking their heads back and forth, removing dirt from the plants before they eat them. They are observed eating during tidal changes and eating in herds up to 12 animals.

Dugongs inhabit shallow tropical, coastal ocean water all year round, unlike manatees who spend several months in fresh water streams and rivers. They are found in coastal waters along East Africa, Northeast India, along the Malay Peninsula, around the North Coast of Australia to New Guinea and many of the island groups of the South Pacific.

Poor eyesight makes a dugong rely on their acute hearing for swimming and navigation. Swimming speed is reported at 10km per hour. Dugongs are also seen 'walking' on their flippers much like the manatee and develop calluses on their flippers. When a dugong feels threatened, it emits a whistling type of sound and double their swim speed to avoid danger.

Dugongs are hunted for their meat, oil, hides for leather, and for their bones and teeth. Some Asian cultures prize dugong products for medicinal purposes as well as other purposes (see "Love Potion #9..or Not"). Many Aboriginal people along the coasts of Australia recognize the dugong meat and oil

as among the most valuable traditional foods. Hunting can be carried out by tribe members with a permit in many areas except those that are designated Preservation Zones.

According to an online article, Israelites used seacows for offerings to the Lord, and made tent coverings from the skin. The article makes reference to Exodus 25:5, 26:14, 35:7, 35:22, and 36:19 from an unknown version of the *Holy Bible*. The New Revised Standard Version of these passages list 'fine leather.' The Hebrew translation of fine leather may or may not refer to dugong skin.

Aside from hunting, dugongs are threatened by oil spills, entanglement in fishing gear, shark and turtle nets, disruption to feeding areas by boats, and pollution caused by coastal development. Dugongs do not have the scarring on their backs like Florida Manatees get from collisions with boat propellers. I am uncertain as to why dugongs do not have the same problems with boat collisions.

Dugongs have made a literary jump into the world of fiction. Jules Verne mentions them in his book 'The Mysterious Island', published in 1847 and set in an uninhabited island in the South Pacific (natural habitat for the dugong). Dugongs and manatees have also made their mark in the land of Pokemon; Dewgong in the Water/Ice Series and Manaty in the Red/Blue Series.

Dugongs are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of the USA and vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature