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Mysterious Manatees

At 3,000 pounds, with a fuzzy face, and moving slow enough for algae to cover their body; it is a wonder how Christopher Columbus mistook the West Indian Manatee for the mythical mermaid.

There are three species of manatees in the world and a close relative, called the dugong. The West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) is divided in two subspecies, the Antillean manatee and the Florida manatee. While the Florida manatee is primarily located around the coasts of the state in which it gets its name, it has traveled up to Rhode Island and over to Texas.

Manatees are nicknamed “sea cows.” Their size; and the fact that they graze on vegetation, such as sea grass; is about the only shared characteristics they have with cattle. Manatees are more closely linked to elephants. The existence of toe nails, type of skin, color and use of their lip are some of the traits shared with the land creature.

As the manatee wears down its front teeth, the front teeth will fall out. The remaining teeth shift forward and new teeth grow in the back. This continues for the entire 50-60 year life span of the animal.

Calves are born after a gestation of 13 months. There is no breeding or calving season, as seen in other marine mammals. The calf can be four feet long and weigh as much as 70 pounds at birth. They drink milk from the nipple located behind each flipper, in the “arm pit.” Calves remain with their mother for two years or longer.

Manatees are independent animals, gathering in groups only in springs. It is in this 72 degree water that manatees are able to survive through cold winter months. Other times of the year the manatee will roam freely in any direction, in salt or fresh water.

The size and shape causes one to think the manatee is fat. However, they have little fat and that is why they require water temperatures between 68 and 74 degrees.

The tail of a manatee is called a peduncle. Dugongs share a shape like that of a dolphin, while a manatee’s peduncle is round. They move their paddle-like peduncle in an up and down motion to carry them through the water at up to 15 miles per hour.

Manatees have no natural predators. They will swim by alligators with no fear. A large reason for being endangered is early hunting, for meat and oil; and being struck by boats.

The manatee’s lungs are located in their back region from behind the head to before the tail. A collision with a boat propeller will leave severe scars and frequently causes death.