

Description

Dugongs, or sea cows which they are commonly referred to, are the only herbivorous mammal that are strictly marine. They are slate grey in colour and can grow up to 3m in length and weigh up to 400kg. A flattened, broad tail fluke is moved up and down to propel them through the water and two pectoral flippers stabilise and steer the Dugong. Dugongs have a large distinctive snout and thick layer of fat for insulation. These animals have relatively small eyes so their vision is quite poor, but their hearing is acute. Sexual dimorphism is either absent or females slightly outweigh males.

Distribution

Australia has the largest remaining population of Dugongs. They inhabit warm shallow protected bays and range in a northern arc from Shark Bay in Western Australia to Moreton Island in south Queensland. Globally the Dugong inhabits the Indo Pacific region spanning over 40 countries.

Diet

Dugongs are vegetarians feeding exclusively on sea grass. Their sensitive bristles just above their mouth feel through the sand to locate the sea grass. A large adult dugong can eat up to 60kg of sea grass in one day. Dugongs are slow moving creatures reaching speeds of only 10km/h.

Breeding

Female dugongs attract a small group of males who fight for the chance to mate with her. After a long 13-15month gestation the female will suckle her calf for a further year and a half from external nipples just under the flippers. The breeding cycle of a dugong is naturally slow with adults reaching maturity at 10-17 years and females breeding once every 3 – 7 years.

Threats

Many factors pose a threat to Dugongs that are typically very vulnerable populations due to their slow population growth rate. Their food source is a true plant that requires light to grow, therefore any sediment or runoff that affects the clarity of the water can eventually cause the sea grass to die off. Dugongs are slow moving animals and fall victim to boat strikes where they are injured by collisions with speeding boats. Becoming trapped and drowning in shark nets and commercial gill nets is probably the greatest threat to dugongs who can only hold their breath for a maximum of 4-6 minutes.

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Sub Phylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Sirenia
Family: Dugongidae
Sub Family: Dugongidae

